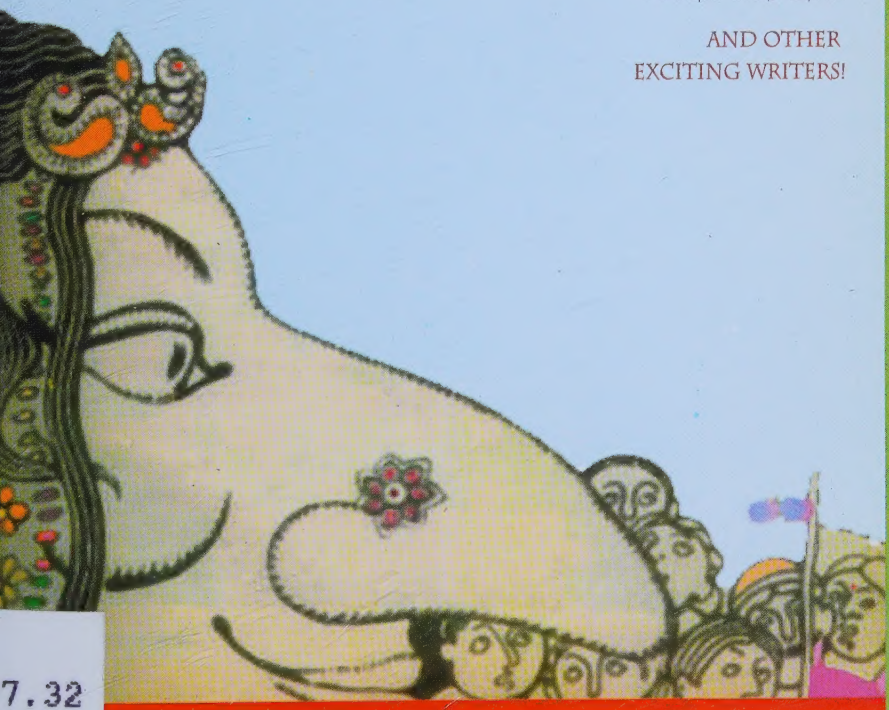
GREAT WRITERS

THE NOSE DOCTOR

UNFORGETTABLE STORIES BY

SATYAJIT RAY
M R KAPOOR
SUBHADRA SEN GUPTA
MARGARET BHATTY
DILIP M SALWI

AND OTHER EXCITING WRITERS!



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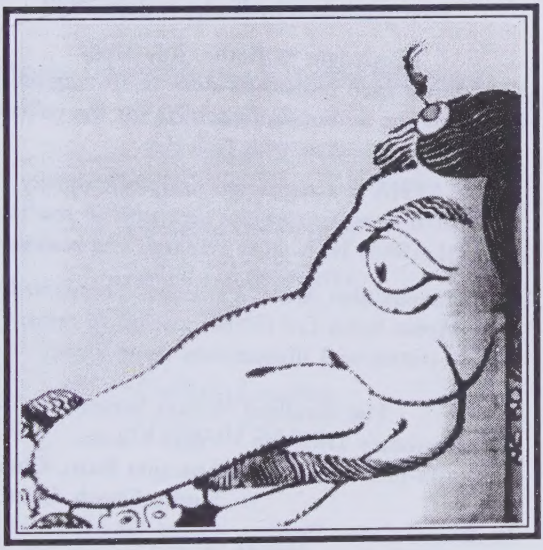

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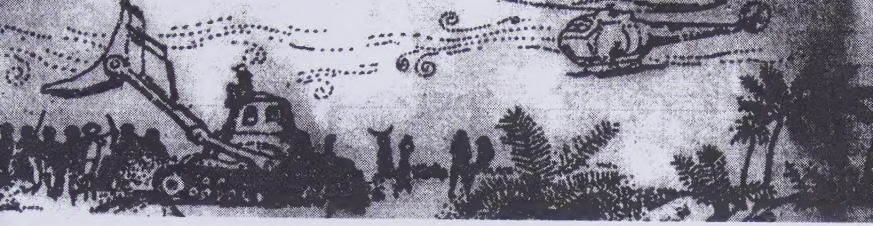

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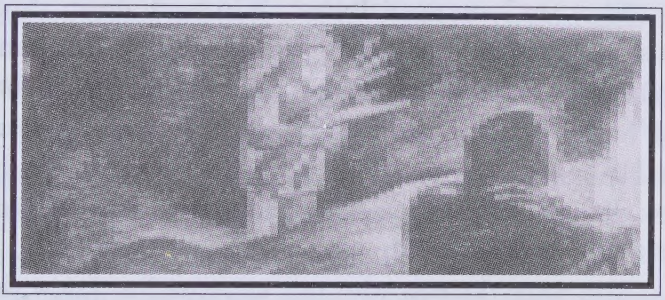
MOUNTAIN ADVENTURE!



C Byrde

Illustrated by Suddhasattwa Basu

"We're lost," announced Bunu. "Not exactly lost," mused Mukun, "If we went back the way we've come, we ..."

"Shut up," snapped Rahul, "Go back down three thousand feet of mountain at this time of the evening – and with bears around? You're crazy!" Mukun kept quiet. That wasn't what he'd meant, but his cousin Rahul was in no mood to be argued with. Rahul was sixteen and thought he knew all there was to know about mountains. Not the type to listen to a ten year old.

"You were the one who was supposed to know the trail," put in Bunu. She was a wiry girl, three years younger than her arrogant cousin.

"If your kid brother hadn't dragged us back," Rahul retorted.

"Mukun walked as steadily as the rest of us," said Bunu. "In any case, we're stuck on the wrong side of this ridge and the path's petered out. What do we do now?"

This trek to a shrine twelve thousand feet up in the Himalayas was to be the highlight of their holiday with their

This story was first published in *Target* in May 1984.

cousin's family. Now it looked as if Rahul's desire to show off his knowledge of the mountains was going to end in disaster.

Bhuvan, the fourth member of the group, said nothing. He was a hill-born boy of twelve. He knew better than anyone the dangers of being caught in the open on a mountain in Garhwal at the beginning of November. The four shivered in the gloom of a rhododendron grove, a hundred feet below the top of the ridge. The sun was dropping all too fast and casting long cold shadows.

Bhuvan started to pick his way through the tangled rhododendrons towards the lowest point of the ridge ahead.

"Where do you think you're going?" cried Rahul.

"We should climb the ridge. From there we can see ..."

"The path's not that way," said Rahul tightly. And he swung round and disappeared behind a huge fallen rock.

"Rahul's a donkey," said Bunu, "Come on, the rest of us must stick together. Let's catch up with Bhuvan."

It wasn't far to the point where the ridge seemed easiest to climb, but the last steep scramble to the top was hard and slow. Bunu panted for breath, and Mukun wondered if his legs would hold out. Only Bhuvan climbed slowly and easily as hill boys do. He waited for the brother and sister at the top. As they dragged themselves over the last couple of feet, they gasped. The harsh rocks of this side of the ridge gave way to rolling meadows that dropped in green waves to the deep valley below. And around was a circle of snow-capped peaks, sparkling in the evening light.

"I don't care if we do die up here," said Bunu, "It's worth it."

"I care," said Mukun, "I got a new pair of football

boots for my birthday, and I haven't even worn them yet." It was a weak joke, but the others laughed. Bhuvan was busy scanning the landscape. "We've got to find shelter," he said. "Meadows are a good sign. The Gujjar shepherds must be coming here in summer with their flocks. They usually make huts ..."

Bunu had taken out the small pair of binoculars she carried for bird-watching. She, too, searched the silent mountainside. "There!" she cried at last. "Near that clump of trees. Aren't there wooden shacks?"

Bhuvan checked and agreed. The only problem was Rahul. They couldn't just leave him wandering on the mountain, while they made for shelter.

"We'll yell for him," said Bunu. "All together!"

Their combined yells fell into the immense silence like raindrops into an ocean.

To their surprise, a dark figure emerged from higher up the ridge, and strode towards them.

"What are you yelling for?" Rahul demanded crossly. "The path to the shrine's up there all right, but you kids will never make it in the dark."

The three stood silently, resentfully. Bunu swallowed and said as calmly as she could, "We've spotted some huts about a kilometre or so across the meadow. That's our best chance, Bhuvan says."

"Bhuvan says!" mocked her cousin. "Then it certainly must be." But he looked carefully at the clump of trees in the dying light, and walked off in that direction.

"Follow me," he called over his shoulder, unnecessarily. Bhuvan winked at Mukun, which made him grin and forget his aching legs. They all took one more look

at the magnificent sunset behind them, then made their way together across the darkening meadow.

The grass was clumpy and tough. They tripped more than once, and had to cross more than one soft patch that was the beginning of a mountain stream.

When Mukun fell flat in one such bog, Bhuvan was on hand to pull him up before his windcheater got soaked through.

It was the toughest walk of Bunu's life. Only the thought of her brother's safety kept her going, cheerfully saying, "We're almost there!" when the meadow deceived again and again with hidden folds that stretched the distance out like elastic.

Rahul had long since disappeared. Still, it was almost dark and it would help if he'd already found a warm dry place for them to sleep.

At last the clump of pine trees loomed ahead, and inside the ring of them, the darker shape of huts.

"It's no use," Rahul's voice came out of the darkness. "We're finished. These huts are nothing but ruins!"

Bunu's heart sank. It couldn't be! She told Bhuvan to come slowly with Mukun and hurried into the clearing. Rahul was sitting hopelessly on a fallen log. Around him were the charred remains of burnt and broken-down huts. Not one had a roof. Not one would give shelter enough to prevent them all freezing in the bitter November night.

Bhuvan and Mukun had arrived and gazed at the destroyed huts. "Must be the forest department. They don't want the Gujjars grazing here," said Bhuvan. Bunu looked at him for help. She had written off Rahul. He might fancy

himself as a leader, but behind his bluster he was useless in a crisis. And this was definitely a crisis.

Bhuvan wandered about the camp. Mukun had collapsed onto a rock thinking his legs would never be the same, but he *was* thinking.

"Look, Bunu," he said, "We might freeze to death tonight, but I'd rather do it on a full stomach. Let's get some water from that stream I nearly fell into just now and make some soup and noodles. There's enough wood lying around for a fire."

"Okay," said Bunu, "I'll get the water. You make the fire." She dumped her rucksack, took out a torch and water bottle and began to move off down the hillside.

"Wait!" called Bhuvan. "We'll eat, all right. But I've got an idea! Come and look here!"

Bunu and Mukun both went with him to the edge of the clearing four or five metres away from the last hut.

"It's like a Red Indian wigwam!" said Mukun. "At least the frame of it." It was a cone-shaped frame for a jhompri, made of saplings but the grass that should have thatched it had blown off and lay scattered around.

"What's the use of it?" said Bunu. "There's no shelter there."

"No," said Bhuvan, "But I think we could build a small shelter inside there – just big enough for the four of us. We won't be able to do it without Rahul, though." "Leave him to me," said Bunu, "Just tell me what you want."

After a few minutes she went up to her bad-tempered cousin. "Rahul, there's a kind of hut over there. Could you come and help us think how to use it. It might be better than nothing. You'd know best ..."

Rahul looked as if he was going to snap out another rude remark; then he changed his mind and went over to the jhompri.

"If we could hang a wooden beam across the middle, we could build a kind of wooden tent with the planks from the huts leaning against it," said Bhuvan softly, "But we can't think how to fix the beam."

"With a rope, of course," said Rahul, regaining his cockiness. "There's a strong nylon one at the top of my rucksack. Go and get it, Mukun." Mukun said nothing but, with a secret smile, made for Rahul's rucksack.

"How will we get enough planks over here?" said Bunu helplessly. "We're all so tired, and not as strong as you, Rahul."

Rahul hesitated.

"We could pass them ...," began Bhuvan.

"We'll make a chain," said Rahul quickly. "I'll go to the nearest hut and pick out the right planks, pass them to Bunu, then Bunu to Mukun and you, Bhuvan, can stack them up inside the jhompri to make the tent. The wind's getting up, though! We'll have to hurry." The first beam was the toughest one to fix, but with Rahul and Bhuvan working together it was soon slung horizontally across the inside of the jhompri, firmly stuck through the wooden framework at either end. While the two worked, Bunu went to fetch water, and Mukun started collecting twigs for a fire. It was lonely work in the darkness. A bitter wind had sprung up. Above, the stars were hard as ice. Working was the best way to keep warm – and to keep from thinking.

"Come on, you two" called Rahul. "Time for the chain-gang." It was very dark, and even with gloves on, the hard

wood planks were cold. They were heavy, too, and soon Bunu's shoulders were aching as she received them from Rahul and then passed them on to Mukun. He, poor fellow, valiantly staggered over to Bhuvan who took each one inside the jhompri and placed it carefully at an angle against the central beam. There was no time for mistakes. The wind was rising and the children's energy was fast running out.

"Enough!" Bhuvan called out finally, "It's finished, Rahul!"

By the light of their biggest torch they looked at the makeshift shelter that could save their lives. "Not bad," Rahul admitted grudgingly. "Let's fill up the cracks with grass. That's a job for you, Bunu. We three will collect the dried grass that's fallen out of this hut."

"We three," thought Bunu. "That's a big improvement on Rahul's usual me and you lot." The chinks were soon packed tight with grass.

At last it was finished. "No food," said Bunu, "I just want to sleep."

"Speak for yourself," said Mukun. "I want my soup or I'll die of hunger instead of cold."

"I don't want to scare you," said Bhuvan, "But we're not out of danger yet. There *are* bears in this area," went on Bhuvan, "We should – I mean – Rahul, what do you think we could do?" Bhuvan was quick to learn, thought Bunu.

"Fire," said Rahul. Then he looked at Bhuvan suspiciously. "But you know that as well as I do ..."

"Let's get together as big a pile of wood as we can," said Bunu quickly. "I'll make the supper on a small fire over here. Then by the time our bonfire stock is collected, we can eat and sleep."

The wind was sharper now, and it seemed as if they'd been slogging forever. Sleep was the sweetest word Bunu could think of. But not yet.

As the boys stumbled around in the darkness collecting wood, she coaxed the fire to heat up a pot of powdered soup and noodles. Huddled behind the jhompri, out of the wind, they ate the steaming mess out of mugs, too tired to say anything, but feeling safe together for the first time since they'd got lost.

"Rinse all the mugs," said Bhuvan, "So the bears won't lick them first and eat *us* later!"

"Ha! Ha!" said Mukun sourly. But he volunteered to do the icy task while Bunu and Bhuvan spread the sleeping bags inside their tiny shelter, and Rahul lit the bonfire.

"All inside, now," said Rahul. "Bunu, Mukun, then Bhuvan and I'll be next to the opening."

They crawled into their sleeping bags. As Rahul came in last, he fixed a thorny bush into the opening.

No one spoke. In a few minutes heavy, rhythmic breathing told Bunu the boys were asleep. Outside she could hear the wind sweeping across the mountain, and the crackle of flames from their fire. In all that darkness, theirs was the only small glow for miles and miles. They were safe – through luck, but also because they hadn't panicked. And tomorrow they'd trek to the shrine … She fell asleep.

"Wake up," called Rahul softly, "See the mountain!" Bunu woke up directly and clambered over her curled up brother and Bhuvan, and crawled out of the shelter into the early morning light. "Oh!" she gasped. The whole mountainside was white – not with snow but with hard frost that glittered

on every blade of grass, on every branch and leaf-needle of the pines.

"I'll get water for the morning tea," said Rahul. He paused. "Last night was rough. We'd never have lasted outside," he went on, hesitating. "You're all great kids ... umm ... sorry ..."

"Today," broke in Bunu with a beaming smile, "I think we're going to have a great day!"

BEPIN CHOUDHURY'S LAPSE OF MEMORY

Satyajit Ray

Art by Suddhasattwa Basu

Every Monday, on his way back from work, Bepin Choudhury would drop in at Kalicharan's in New Market to buy books. Crime stories, ghost stories and thrillers. He had to buy at least five at a time to last him through the week. He lived alone, was not a good mixer, had few friends, and didn't like spending time in idle chat. Those who called in the evening got through their business quickly and left. Those who didn't show signs of leaving would be told around eight o'clock by Bepin Babu that he was under doctor's orders to have dinner at eight thirty. After dinner he would rest for half an hour and then turn in with a book. This was a routine which had persisted unbroken for years.

Today, at Kalicharan's, Bepin Babu had the feeling that someone was observing him from close quarters. He turned round and found himself looking at a round faced, meek-looking man who now broke into a smile.

"I don't suppose you recognize me."

Bepin Babu felt ill at ease. It didn't seem that he had ever encountered this man before. The face seemed quite unfamiliar.

This story was first published in *Target* in July 1984.

"But you're a busy man. You must meet all kinds of people all the time."

"Have we met before?" asked Bepin Babu.

The man looked greatly surprised. "We met every day for a whole week. I arranged for a car to take you to the Hudroo falls. In 1958. In Ranchi. My name is Parimal Ghose."

"Ranchi?"

Now Bepin Babu realized that it was not he but this man who was making a mistake. Bepin Babu had never been to Ranchi. He had been at the point of going several times, but never made it. He smiled and said, "Do you know who I am?"

The man raised his eyebrows, bit his tongue and said, "Do I know you? Who doesn't know Bepin Choudhury?"

Bepin Babu now turned towards the bookshelves and said, "Still you're making a mistake. One often does. I've never been to Ranchi."

The man now laughed aloud.

"What are you saying, Mr Choudhury? You had a fall in Hudroo and cut your right knee. I brought you iodine. I had fixed up a car for you to go to Netarhat the next day, but you couldn't because of the pain in the knee. Can't you recall anything? Someone else you know was also in Ranchi at that time. Mr Dinesh Mukerji. You stayed in a bungalow. You said you didn't like hotel food and would prefer to have your meals cooked by a bawarchi. Mr Mukerji stayed with his sister. You had a big argument about the moon landing, remember? I'll tell you more: you always carried a bag with your books in it on your sight-seeing trips. Am I right or not?"

Bepin Babu spoke quietly, his eyes still on the books.

"Which month in '58 are you talking about?"

The man said, "Just before the Pujas. October."

"No, sir," said Bepin Babu. "I spent Puja in '58 with a friend in Kanpur. You're making a mistake. Good day."

But the man didn't go, nor did he stop talking.

"Very strange. One evening I had tea with you in a veranda of your bungalow. You spoke about your family. You said you had no children, and that you had lost your wife ten years ago. Your only brother had died insane, which is why you didn't want to visit the mental hospital in Ranchi ..."

When Bepin Babu had paid for the books and was leaving the shop, the man was still looking at him in utter disbelief.

Bepin Babu's car was safely parked in Bertram Street by the Lighthouse Cinema. He told the driver as he got into the car, "Just drive by the Ganga, will you, Sitaram." Driving up the Strand Road, Bepin Babu regretted having paid so much attention to the intruder. He had never been to Ranchi – no question about it. It was inconceivable that he should forget such an incident which took place only six or seven years ago. He had an excellent memory. Unless – Bepin Babu's head reeled.

Unless he was losing his mind.

But how could that be? He was working daily in his office. It was a big firm, and he was doing a responsible job. He wasn't aware of anything ever going seriously wrong. Only today he spoke for half an hour at an important meeting. And yet ...

And yet the man knew a great deal about him. How? He even seemed to know some intimate details. The bag of books, wife's death, brother's insanity ... The only mistake was about his having gone to Ranchi. Not a mistake; a deliberate lie. In '58, during the Pujas, he was in Kanpur at his friend Haridas Bagchi's place. All Bepin Babu had to do was write to – no, there was no way of writing to Haridas. Bepin Babu suddenly remembered that Haridas had left with his wife for Japan some weeks ago, and he didn't have his address.

But where was the need for proof? If it so happened that the police were trying to pin a crime on him which had taken place in Ranchi in '58, he might have needed to prove he hadn't been there. He himself was fully aware that he hadn't been to Ranchi – and that was that.

The river breeze was bracing, and yet a slight discomfort lingered in Bepin Babu's mind.

Around Hastings, Bepin Babu had the sudden notion of rolling up his trousers and taking a look at his right knee.

There was the mark of an old inch-long cut. It was impossible to tell when the injury had occured. Had he never had a fall as a boy and cut his knee? He tried to recall such an incident, but couldn't.

Then Bepin Babu suddenly thought of Dinesh Mukerji. The man had said that Dinesh was in Ranchi at the same time. The best thing surely would be to ask him. He lived quite near – in Beninandan Street. What about going right now? But then, if he had really never been to Ranchi, what would Dinesh think if Bepin Babu asked for a confirmation? He would probably conclude Bepin Babu was going nuts. No; it would be ridiculous to ask him.

And he knew how ruthless Dinesh's sarcasm could be.

Sipping a cold drink in his air-conditioned living room, Bepin Babu felt at ease again. Such a nuisance! Just because they have nothing else to do, they go about getting into other people's hair.

After dinner, snuggling in bed with one of the new thrillers, Bepin Babu forgot all about the man in New Market.

Next day, in the office, Bepin Babu noticed that with every passing hour, the previous day's encounter was occupying more and more of his mind. That look of round-eyed surprise on that round face, the disbelieving snigger ... If the man knew so much about Bepin Babu, how could he make such a mistake about the Ranchi trip?

Just before lunch – at five minutes to one – Bepin Babu couldn't check himself any more. He opened the phone book. He had to ring up Dinesh Mukerji. It was better to settle the question over the phone; at least the embarrassment on his face wouldn't show.

Two-Three-Five-Six-One-Six.

Bepin Babu dialled the number.

"Hallo."

"Is that Dinesh? This is Bepin here."

"Well, well – what's the news?"

"I just wanted to find out if you recalled an incident which took place in '58."

"'58? What incident?"

"Were you in Calcutta right through that year? That's the first thing I've got to know."

"Wait just a minute ... '58 ... just let me check in my diary."

For a minute there was silence. Bepin Babu could feel that his heartbeat had gone up. He was sweating a little.

"Hallo."

"Yes."

"I've got it. I'd been out twice."

"Where?"

"Once in February – nearby – to Krishnanagar to a nephew's wedding. And then ... but you'd know about this one. The trip to Ranchi. You were there too. That's all. But what's all this sleuthing about?"

"No, I just wanted to – anyway, thanks."

Bepin Babu slammed the receiver down and gripped his head with his hands. He felt his head swimming. A chill seemed to spread over his body. There were sandwiches in his tiffin box, but he didn't eat them. He had lost his appetite. Completely.

After lunchtime, Bepin Babu realized that he couldn't possibly carry on sitting at his desk and working. This had never happened in the twenty five years he had been with the firm. He had a reputation for being a tireless, conscientious worker. The men below him all held him in awe. In the worst moments of crisis, even when faced with the most acute problems, Bepin Babu had always kept his cool and weathered the storm. But today his head was in a whirl.

Back home at two thirty, Bepin Babu shut himself up in his bedroom, lay down in bed and tried to gather his wits together. He knew that it was possible to lose one's memory through an injury in the head, but he didn't know of a single instance of someone remembering everything except one particular incident – and a fairly recent and significant one

at that. He had always wanted to go to Ranchi; to have gone there, done things, and not to remember was something utterly impossible.

At seven, Bepin Babu's servant came and announced that Seth Girdhariprasad had come. A rich businessman – and a VIP – this Girdhariprasad. And he had come by appointment. But Bepin Babu was feeling so low that he had to tell his servant that it was not possible for him to leave his bed. To hell with VIPs.

At seven thirty, the servant came again. Bepin Babu had just dozed off and was in the middle of an unpleasant dream when the servant's knock woke him up. Who was it this time? "Chuni Babu, sir. Says it's very important."

Bepin Babu knew what Chuni had come for. Chunilal had been at school with him. He'd been having a rough time lately and had been coming to see him about a job. Bepin Babu knew it was not possible to do anything for him and, in fact, told him so. But Chuni kept turning up like a bad penny.

Bepin Babu sent word that not only was it not possible for him to see Chuni now, but not in several weeks.

But as soon as the servant stepped out of the room, it struck Bepin Babu that Chuni might remember something about the '58 trip. There was no harm in asking him.

Bepin Babu hurried down the stairs and into the living room. Chuni was about to leave, but seeing Bepin Babu appear, he turned round hopefully.

Bepin Babu didn't beat about the bush.

"Listen, Chuni – I want to ask you something. You have a good memory, and you've been seeing me off and on

for a long time. Just throw your mind back and tell me – did I go to Ranchi in '58?"

Chuni said, "'58? It must have been '58. Or was it '59?"

"You're sure that I did go to Ranchi?"

Chuni's look of amazement was not unmixed with worry.

"D'you mean you have doubts about having gone at all?"

"Did I go? Do you remember clearly?"

Chuni was standing up; he now sat down on the sofa, fixed Bepin Babu with a long, hard stare and said, "Bepin, have you taken to drugs or something? As far as I know, you had a clean record where such things were concerned. I know that old friendships don't mean much to you, but at least you had a good memory. You can't really mean that you've forgotten about the Ranchi trip?"

Bepin Babu had to turn away from Chuni's incredulous stare.

"D'you remember what my last job was?" asked Chunilal.

"Of course. You worked in a travel agency."

"You remember that and you don't remember that it was I who fixed up your railway booking for Ranchi? I went to the station to see you off; one of the fans in your compartment was not working – I got an electrician to fix it. Have you forgotten everything? Whatever is the matter with you? You don't look too well, you know."

Bepin Babu sighed and shook his head.

"I've been working too hard," he said at last. "That must be the reason. Must see about consulting a specialist."

Doubtless it was Bepin's condition which made Chunilal leave without mentioning anything about a job.

Paresh Chanda was a young physician with a pair of bright eyes and a sharp nose. He became thoughtful when he heard about Bepin Babu's symptoms. "Look, Dr Chanda," said Bepin Babu desperately, "You must cure me of this horrible illness. I can't tell you how it's affecting my work. There are so many kinds of drugs these days; isn't there something specific for such a complaint? I can have it sent from abroad if it's not to be had here. But I must be rid of these symptoms."

Dr Chanda shook his head.

"You know what, Mr Choudhury," he said. "I've never had to deal with a case such as yours. Frankly, this is quite outside my field of experience. But I have one suggestion. I don't know if it'll work, but it's worth a try. It can do no harm."

Bepin Babu leaned forward anxiously.

"As far as I can make out," said Dr Chanda, "And I think you're of the same opinion – you must have been to Ranchi, but due to some unknown reason, the entire episode has slipped out of your mind. What I suggest is that you go to Ranchi once again. The sight of the place may remind you of your trip. This is not impossible. More than that I cannot do at the moment. I'm prescribing a nerve tonic and a tranquilizer. Sleep is essential, or the symptoms will get more pronounced."

It may have been the sleeping pill, and the advice which the doctor gave, which made Bepin Babu feel somewhat better the next morning.

After breakfast, he rang up his office, gave some instructions, and then procured a first class ticket for Ranchi for the same evening.

Getting off the train at Ranchi next morning, he realized at once that he had never been there before.

He came out of the station, took a taxi and drove around the town for a while. He realized that the streets, the buildings, the hotels, the bazaars, the Morabadi Hill – with none of these had he the slightest acquaintance. Would a trip to the Hudroo Falls help? He didn't believe so, but, at the same time, he didn't wish to leave with the feeling that he hadn't tried enough. So he arranged for a car and left for Hudroo in the afternoon.

At five o'clock the same afternoon in Hudroo, two Gujarati gentlemen from a group of picnickers discovered Bepin Babu lying unconscious beside a boulder. When the ministrations of the two gentlemen brought him round, the first thing Bepin Babu said was, "I'm finished. There's no hope left."

Next morning, Bepin Babu was back in Calcutta. He realized that there was truly no hope for him. Soon he would lose everything: his will to work, his confidence, his ability, his balance of mind. Was he going to end up in the asylum at ...? Bepin Babu couldn't think any more.

Back home, he rang up Dr Chanda and asked him to come over. Then, after a shower, he got into bed with an icebag clamped on his head. Just then the servant brought him a letter which someone had left in the letter box. A greenish envelope with his name in red ink on it. Above the name it said "Urgent and Confidential." In spite of his condition, Bepin Babu had a feeling that he ought to go

through the letter. He tore open the envelope and took out the letter. This is what he read –

Dear Bepin,

I had no idea that affluence would bring about the kind of change in you that it has done. Was it so difficult for you to help out an old friend down on his luck? I have no money, so my resources are limited. What I have is imagination, a part of which I used in retribution of your unfeeling behaviour.

The man in New Market is a neighbour and acquaintance of mine and a capable actor who played the part I wrote for him. Dinesh Mukerji has never been particularly well-disposed towards you; so he was quite willing to help. As for the mark on your knee, you will surely recall that you tripped on a rope in Chandpal Ghat back in '39?

Well, you'll be all right again now. A novel I've written is being considered by a publisher. If he likes it enough, it'll see me through the next few months.

Yours,
Chunilal

When Dr Chanda came, Bepin Babu said, "I'm fine. It all came back as soon as I got off the train at Ranchi."

"A unique case," said Dr Chanda. "I shall certainly write about it in a medical journal."

"The reason why I sent for you," said Bepin Babu, "Is that I have a pain in the hip from a fall I had in Ranchi. If you could prescribe a pain killer ..."

A FRIEND FOR PAPUN

Saibal Chakravarty

Art by Vandana J Bist

The tall sal tree standing close to the windows is an old friend of Papun – the twelve year old boy of the small village by the river. This is the room where Papun reads and sleeps in the night. Their house has only two rooms – the other one is occupied by Papun's parents. His father Mukunda is a labourer in the Weavers' Cooperative in the town across the river. Mukunda leaves for work early in the morning and returns in the evening. Their tiled roof house is small but it is skirted by a big garden with a number of trees. The sal is the tallest and oldest of them.

Papun has made a long friendship with this sal. It stands so close to his room that he can touch its big and rough trunk just by stretching his hand through the window. Papun has a small table and stool near the window and whenever he likes to be refreshed he touches his friend's body and the feel gives him a kind of pleasure to go ahead with his drab hometasks.

Early morning, with the rustling of the leaves of the big sal Papun wakes up and while he reads books of history

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and geography the tree keeps quiet. Around nine o'clock Papun goes for a bath and after his bath when he is about to leave for school there is a sudden stirring in the branches and leaves of the sal. Papun understands that his friend is bidding him goodbye. In the afternoon when the little boy returns from school he finds his friend welcoming him with similar movements of thick leaves. Now there are lots of birds chirping on its branches. Papun imagines that these birds come to the tree and tell him many stories. Stories of far and wide places, of hills and rivers they fly over every day. Papun can hear the tree telling him through the strange sound of its leaves: "See these birds, Papun? They tell me so many tales. They travel through many beautiful lands, see so many people ... Wouldn't you like to see them, Papun?"

Papun nods his head. Yes, he likes to see these unknown places which did not find place in his geography book. Papun loves traveling. Each year during the summer vacation he visits his maternal uncle's place at Kopai – a village about ten miles to the north from Dolon where he lives. This is the only place where he has traveled so far. In the night when the sky is full of stars, the sal makes strange and queer sounds with its leaves as if to whisper to Papun's ears: "There are many places beyond those you see, Papun. When you grow up you will know how big the world is ... how beautiful the curves of the river down the hills may look, how fast a pack of deer run to get away from a menacing cheetah, how happy a peacock feels when it rains after a long spell of summer."

Then one day a branch of the tree falls down. The leaves

gradually dry up and look colourless. Now there are not so many leaves and birds seldom sit on its branches. One morning Papun's father looks at the tall tree and says, "The tree has become old. One of these days I must cut it down otherwise it may damage our house or injure some passer-by."

Papun could hardly believe what his father was saying. He felt like crying. He ran to his mother who was washing clothes in the pond nearby and said, "Mother, tell Father not to cut the sal, please."

Mother looked at her son's face and smiled. "Of what use is an old tree, Papun? It does not allow the light to come to your room. One of these days the tree will die ... you must be prepared to see so many changes in life." She tried to console him.

But Papun felt restless. Now he sits with a glum face at the window in the morning without caring whether the sal was trying to tell him something through the strange murmuring of the leaves. He does not go out to play with his friends in the afternoon. Papun pleaded again with his parents to spare the tree. But they did not pay any heed.

Next Sunday at daybreak a group of labourers came with an axe and other tools. Papun's father Mukunda sat on a stool in the garden smoking his hookah. As the shining axe struck the tree for the first time a terrific sound was produced. Papun felt his friend was crying out in pain. Mukunda watched the progress of work throughout the morning as it was his day off from work. The strong and sturdy tree was under ceaseless attack by four able-bodied workmen.

Around noon the sal finally gave way. At this point

Mukunda came inside the house for a bath and told Papun's mother, "The wood of the tree is so good and heavy that I do not want to use all of it as fuel ... Papun needs a charpai to sleep on. So I will make a nice cot for him with the logs. What do you say?"

"That's a good idea," agreed Papun's mother Shova. "Since he was born, Papun has been sleeping on the floor on a mattress. Now he will have a nice cot of his own." From his window Papun looked at the workers working with pieces of wood. What was once a lively and majestic tree had now turned into pieces of dead logs. The birds now fly away chirping sharply, terrified at the fall of the tree – their place to live and sing for all these years. Papun's eyes fill with tears. Now his room is flooded with light and there is free flow of air too. Mother was right. But Papun felt that he liked the shade of the tree better and the rumblings of leaves and a feeling that a friend was very near him all the time. Nobody can imagine how Papun misses the tree and all the sweet things associated with it.

After a hard day's work, the old labourer Sardar Gokul comes to Papun waving his mop of grey hair and says, "Hello Papun, you must be feeling very happy. Now you are going to have a new cot. Ah-ha, how many children of Dolon sleep on cots, I do not know ... Lucky boy!" Papun's mother comes out from the kitchen with a pot in her hand to serve tea to Gokul and other workers. As Papun sees his mother, he sobs, embracing her with his arms.

"Don't worry, Papun," Shova caresses Papun's hair. "I know you loved the old tree, Papun. But now you will get him closer than ever. And you will have more friends as you grow up, my child."

Next week a new cot arrives for Papun. Now there is plenty of light and air in his room too. But he has lost so much which can hardly be made up with his new possession. Lying on his new cot, Papun now thinks all the time of the tree. Suddenly a tiny sparrow sits on the window. Papun looks at the sparrow. Has he seen the bird earlier? Papun wonders.

The sparrow chirps as if to say: "I know the tree is no more, Papun. But the unknown lands and the tales of distant places are still there. We still fly over these cities and villages, mountains and rivers. As the sal is no more we will tell you about them."

Papun cheers up a little. Now the sparrow comes to Papun's window in the afternoon and gives him company. More birds gradually follow it. Papun enjoys the gathering of birds on the bare wood of the cot. He does all his homework, keeping the bed rolled up on one side. As days pass on Papun feels he is sitting on one of the branches of the sal – and the birds are all telling him of their experiences. He realized that now it is his turn to tell the tree the stories and all that had been happening around him. All the sweet rumblings of the leaves which the tree produced when it was alive and the play of light and shade on its body are coming back to his mind. Papun now touches the wood of the cot with affection and says, "Do you know what happened in school today? My teacher said that my essay on A Tree is the best in the whole class. Don't you feel happy? And do you know what I am going to do tomorrow? I am going to the annual fair by the river with father. I will buy toys, sweets and have so much fun. I shall tell you all that I have seen in the fair, and stories I know when I get back in the evening."

It was about a week after Papun's new cot had arrived. He has started enjoying the visit of the birds and passing time with them. Then one evening it was getting late and Papun's mother wondered what her son was doing locked in his room since his return from school. She could not hear him reading. A worried mother came to Papun's room and found him fallen asleep on the cot embracing it with both hands. She comes closer to Papun and finds marks of tears now dried up on his cheeks but she also notices a sweet, satisfying smile on his lips – like the first ray of the rising sun.

She did not know however that Papun was now flying over a land with beautiful trees and rivers – to discover a tale not heard by his friend.

CALLISTO LAUGHS

Dilip M Salwi

Illustrated by Ajit Ninan

Hello! Hello! Sabre X to Colony No 4. This is Captain Amol Tawde speaking from the scoutship Sabre X of Vikrant II."

As Captain Amol spoke rapidly over the microphone, he glanced through the cockpit window. Right below him were the three dull brown domes of Colony No 4, firmly entrenched in a deep white valley on Callisto, one of the moons of Jupiter. From horizon to horizon, an icy whiteness spread everywhere on the small world. Captain Amol could see that beautiful phenomenon, a "Snow-bang," for which Callisto was so famous all over the solar system. A puff of white rose column-like from a crevasse on the horizon; it reached a height of about twenty metres and then broke down into tiny puffs of snow against the star-studded sky. On the little world of Callisto snow rose up from the ground instead of falling from the sky!

"Hello! Hello! Sabre X to Colony No 4 ...," went on Captain Amol automatically, as he admired the beauty of Callisto. He did not notice how much time had passed before a voice came over his headphones.

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"Hello! Hello! Colony No 4 to Sabre X. This is Robert Howard, First Officer of the colony," said the voice.

"Mr Howard," returned the Captain, "I have orders to land and visit your colony. Could you ..." His sentence was cut off as the headphone suddenly went dead. Had Mr Howard disconnected the call? Annoyed, Captain Amol looked around and his eyes met the smiling eyes of his co-pilot and navigator, Hans Mikael Kilworth. "Weather's bad here. All snow!" he said, smiling and shrugging his shoulders, "Try again. Some pole must have fallen!" Captain Amol glanced sternly at his only companion in the scoutship. Kilworth was from the earth, where in bad weather poles do fall and disrupt communication lines. "He's never serious!" thought Amol. "What a cartoon old mother earth has produced!"

Captain Amol broke the connection and again tabbed some buttons in the control panel. "Hello! Hello! Sabre X to Colony No 4," he rapidly repeated. "Mr Howard, are you okay?"

For some time there came no reply and then abruptly the same voice cut in. "Yes, Captain Amol, I'm fine," it said, "How's everything? How are your wives and children?" Captain Amol was taken aback. He was a bachelor. There was no question of wives and children. But why should the colony's first officer ask him this question anyway, he wondered. Meanwhile, Kilworth, who was also listening to the conversation, burst into laughter.

"Will you please shut up?" Captain Amol ordered tensely. He remembered the secret briefing he had got from Vikrant's Commander before he left the mother ship: "The Callisto colonists have gone mad," said Commander

Riaymat Ali. "Your mission is to check what's wrong. It may be purely psychological or a disease. We don't know."

For the last week or so, something seemed to be haywire in the colonies on Callisto, as far as could be judged from the wireless radio contact with them. The space orbiting station Achilles 1, which was in an orbit of Jupiter, had been receiving queer responses from the colonists. When this was communicated to the High Command of the Space Goodwill Council headquarters on the Moon, they became worried about the colonists's safety. Orders were sent out to the spaceship Vikrant II, at that time returning from an exploratory mission to Uranus, to orbit Jupiter and investigate. The Vikrant's Commander decided to send a scoutship down and he chose Captain Amol Tawde to command the mission. Amol was young, but had been a hero of many earlier exploration trips to Saturn, Uranus and Titan.

That secret briefing was just an hour ago. Captain Amol had received the orders to personally inspect all the colonies on the snow-covered Callisto. He was expected to land, but advised not to take unnecessary risks unless he was sure what exactly was wrong. Amol's call on wireless radio to the first colony was the first check. Now, he was in a fix. Something was definitely odd, but he had to try to get Colony 4's cooperation in landing.

"Well, Mr Howard," said Captain Amol clearing his throat, "I'm glad to say that we are all okay. We wish to make a ground visit. Will you please switch on the landing lights?"

Captain Amol waited with bated breath but no reply

came. Suddenly, he again felt that the headphone was dead. Or was it the usual delay observed while talking over interplanetary distances? Impossible! The domes of the colony were right before Amol's eyes. He was about to cut the connection and try a fresh call, when the headphone suddenly came to life again.

"Landing lights! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!" The voice boomed in the silence of Sabre X's cockpit. Following the booming laughter came the suppressed chuckles of co-pilot Kilworth. He couldn't resist a good laugh. But he suddenly stopped, puzzled as something very peculiar came over his headphones: "One, two, three, four, five, Ha! Ha! Ha! Plus, minus, multiply, divide. Ha! Ha!"

"What's all this, Captain?" said Kilworth, truly alarmed, pointing at the headphones. "Have they gone mad?"

"I've begun to think so," replied Captain Amol. "We'll have to land without any help. Get everything ready, including the laser weapons."

"What are you talking about, Captain? Landing on Callisto without landing signals? The visibility is so poor in this snow-drenched world and the snow-bangs are unpredictable. We could easily be trapped in a column of snow! Besides, these colonists have gone crazy!"

Kilworth's protests were drowned in the peculiar voices coming through the headphones, but Captain Amol understood what was in his co-pilot's mind. In sheer disgust he cut off the wireless radio. In the ominous silence that followed, he could think clearly. Was it possible that some virus had made the colonists mad? If so, it would certainly not be advisable to land on Callisto.

"We'll report back to the Vikrant," he said. "Let the

Commander decide whether we should risk landing. Okay?" The atmosphere in the cockpit became less tense, as the Captain tabbed some buttons on his wireless set.

"Commander, your guess is absolutely correct," said Captain Amol, when he got through, "The colonists have gone mad. They are uncooperative. We are still trying to find out why. Should we land on our own ...?"

It took ages for the Vikrant's Commander to reply, so it seemed to Captain Amol. Had the radio link again been broken? Suddenly the voice of the Commander came over the headphones.

"May I know," said the Commander, "Who told you that the colonists have gone mad? I never did. And what are you trying to find out there? In the first place, who sent you on this mission? Not me! Ha! Ha! Ha! Square, Circle, Rectangle, Triangle ... Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Both the Captain and the co-pilot exchanged startled glances as the laughter continued uninterrupted. All kinds of questions were hovering in their minds. Had the same virus infected the Vikrant and sent them mad? Or, was it possible that they themselves were out of their minds?

"Iron, Silver, Copper, Lead. Ha! Ha! Ha! Green, Red, Yellow. Ha! Ha! Ha! ...," the Vikrant's Commander continued.

Captain Amol could get no help there, nor on Callisto. What should he do? To land Sabre X without cooperation was highly dangerous but now he could not go back to the Vikrant, where the virus seemed to already have taken its toll. Exasperated, he shut off the laughter of the Commander. As he flicked the switch, his eyes fell on the short range radar screen.

"Kilworth, look at the radar!" he shouted, "Quick. Let's move off! Accelerate!"

On the radar was a ghost-like blob moving towards their scoutship at an incredible speed. Immediately Kilworth pushed some buttons and was about to place his hand on the control bar when he stopped dead and, pointing at the port window on his right, called out: "Captain, we're lost! Look at that!" A luminous orange dot glowed over Callisto's horizon and was growing at a fantastic rate. Captain Amol's face went ashen. "It's coming straight at us, Kilworth," he cried. "Escape Manoeuvre 2. Avoid collision! Quick!" The next moment the scoutship lurched forward and then swung around, its nuclear generators roaring in the ominous stillness. But the sudden manoeuver made no difference. The orangish ball was still heading straight for Sabre X.

Suddenly, some orange rays began to spread from the object, which turned yellow and then blue. The next moment the object was not there. Instead, there appeared out of nowhere a mammoth spherical spaceship!

Paralyzed, the two occupants of the scoutship stared at the titanic ship like two kids in a paddle boat who had suddenly come across a whale. There were small round notches in the structure of the ship. Yellow, blue and red lights were filtering through them.

As Captain Amol and co-pilot Kilworth watched the marvellous ship that had materialized out of a ball, they felt a beam of light directed at them. And as long as the beam was on them they could hear faint sounds of hearty laughter. The next moment the light beam was withdrawn. The entire spherical ship began to tremble like a leaf before a storm. Then suddenly it vanished. In its place the same

glowing orange football appeared, which moved away so fast it became a pinhead of light, soon lost among Callisto's star-studded sky.

Captain Amol was stunned and realized he was still alive only when rivers of perspiration soaked his back and made it sticky.

Suddenly the wireless sprang to life. It was a call from the outside. His fingers still trembling, Captain Amol made the connection. A voice immediately echoed through the cabin: "Hello! Hello! From Vikrant to Sabre X ..."

It was like a call from home! "Sabre X to Vikrant. Receiving you. Speak on."

"This is Commander Ali," said the voice. "Are you two okay? I mean the alien ship ..."

"Ah, what about you, sir?" cut in Captain Amol, excitedly, "I hope you are all okay – I mean, no one has gone mad?"

"What are you talking about, Captain!" exclaimed Commander Ali. "All this time we've been feeling that you two have gone crazy! We're all perfectly sane. Don't worry," he added coolly, "The villain is clearly that alien ship. We spotted it only a few minutes back. Complete your mission and land on Callisto. Your presence is badly required. Over!"

Within seconds, Captain Amol had contacted First Officer Howard and the landing lights were switched on. As Kilworth made preparations for the landing, Captain Amol looked out through the cockpit window. His attention was immediately drawn towards a yellowish blob over the horizon of Callisto. For a second his hair stood on end, fearing the alien ship's return. But, no, it was the orange orb of Jupiter.

He could see the "eye" of the planet – the giant cyclone ranging in its atmosphere. It seemed to Captain Amol as if the eye of Jupiter was assuring him that it was always there to keep a watch on the colony's inhabitants. At least for the moment, all was peaceful again on the white and beautiful world.

Postscript

Captain Amol Tawde's mission was soon over. His report was written and sent to the Space Goodwill Council at their headquarters on the Moon. Were the Callistan colonists really mad for a while? What was the role of the alien ship in the mystery?

Excerpts from the Mission Report:

"... Nobody was mad on Callisto. Nor was there any virus infection. It was a "trick," played upon the colonists by an alien ship. My survey of the colonies clearly suggests that the alien ship landed on Callisto on the day queer radio responses were noticed. The colonists themselves had the same mad messages whenever they tried to contact the outside world. Clearly the alien ship was tampering with our radio communications. It probably had a gadget which could catch an incoming radio signal or signals, copy the pitch and tone of the voice and then jam that signal and broadcast their own signals in the same voice. We do not know how that was done. The brief pauses observed during the conversations on the wireless radio amply support this theory. When the alien ship left Callisto normal communications were restored ..."

"... the motive of the alien ship in landing on a tiny world like Callisto is puzzling. Its presence created fear and

chaos in the colonies and the outside world. Yet, when an encounter between us took place, the ship left without harming us. It must belong to a civilization far more technologically sophisticated than ours. I strongly feel that the ship was trying to communicate with us, revealing its own presence on Callisto. The numerical digits, the metals, the primary colours, which the ship was broadcasting support this view. I particularly felt this when the beam from the alien ship examined us in Sabre X and we heard laughter in our ears. Perhaps, the alien ship thought that our laughing was a sign of happiness, of friendship. It therefore repeatedly used it in the communications. We totally misunderstood these intentions and thought everyone had gone mad."

" ... Nowhere in my report have I mentioned alien beings – only the alien ship. I personally believe that the ship was a robot which, having no one to guide it properly, to suit our level of technology, failed in its task of communicating with us."

" ... To avoid such a crisis again, we should install emergency laser communications systems in all the colonies in the solar system. Any alien ship would find it far more difficult, if not impossible, to break the code of the laser system and create the chaos and "madness" that we experienced when Callisto laughed."

MUSIC MAGIC

Subhadra Sen Gupta

Illustrated by Rajesh Bhal

Like most mornings, Irfan woke listening to his brother Aftab playing the shehnai. Actually it was rather a beautiful way to wake up, the muted gentle music merging with the early morning air. But it also made him sad. Aftab was such a good shehnai player, he deserved to play for a Nawab, not make a paltry living playing at weddings.

The bad times began when their father died. He had been one of the most famous shehnai players of Lucknow and was the family player of Nawab Sarfaraz Khan, the richest nawab in town. When he died Aftab was only fourteen, too young to take his father's place. The Nawab got another player. Now Aftab was eighteen and his only dream was to play for Nawab Sarfaraz like his father. For Irfan and their mother it would mean a little money for good clothes and regular meals, but it all depended on Aftab.

Irfan suddenly realized that Aftab had stopped playing. Usually he played for hours. Curious, he got out of bed, went out into the balcony to find Aftab sitting there looking sadly at his shehnai.

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"Bhaijaan?" Irfan asked. "What's the matter?" Aftab looked up. "Nawab Sarfaraz's shehnai player has left."

"Oh good!" Irfan said happily and then looked puzzled. "Then why are you looking so worried?"

"I just can't get to meet him. For a week I've gone every day to the Nawab's haveli. First the chowkidar wouldn't let me in. Then the Nawab is always busy. He's eating, he's with friends, he's playing chess and will not be disturbed." He shook his head angrily, "Hah! Chess! He's always playing chess."

"Well, chess is fun," Irfan commented. "Now what will you do?" "I don't know. If Nawabsaab gets another shehnai player before I can play for him I'm finished. Just finished."

Later in the morning Irfan's friend Aman looked at him and said, "Why are you looking so glum?"

"It's Aftab. He's been trying to meet Nawab Sarfaraz Khan and no one will let him in."

"Meet the Nawab?"

"His shehnai player has left."

"Oh." Aman understood and sat on the balcony wall quietly for a while, thoughtfully swinging a leg. Irfan waited. His friend Aman was one of the smartest boys he knew and when he looked thoughtful and swung his legs you did not disturb him. Aman could come up with some real life-saving ideas. "You and I'll go and meet the Nawab," Aman said suddenly.

"We? You're crazy!" Irfan said disgustedly. "When even Aftab can't get in?"

"Will you listen?" Aman said patiently. "We'll have to tell some lies, though." "No problem," said Irfan.

"Then go home and put on your best achkan and cap. Comb your hair and wash your face. I'll do the same. We have to go to Rattan Seth's jewellery shop first and then to the Nawab's haveli."

So later in the day Irfan and Aman stood by the tall gates of Nawab Sarfaraz Khan's beautiful haveli in Hazratgunj. They were looking surprisingly neat. Aman carried a small red jewellery box in his hand. The box was empty. He looked at Irfan's nervous face and said, "Don't worry. I come here often with my master Rattan Seth the jeweller. He comes to show the Nawab his newest designs and I carry the boxes for him. The chowkidar knows me." Sure enough the chowkidar came out, bent a face with huge curly moustaches and said, "Yes?"

Aman smiled politely, "I've come from Rattan Seth's shop, huzoor, with jewellery for the Nawabsaab."

"Where's the seth?" the chowkidar asked. "And who is this boy?"

"The seth is not well, huzoor. This is Irfan. He also works at the shop." The chowkidar shrugged and said, "Go in."

Past the gate, Irfan looked in wonder at one of the most beautiful houses he had ever seen. Sloping green lawns with beds of roses, and shady mango trees, led to broad steps going up to a veranda with marble columns. They reached a tall door with a chik hanging before it, hiding the room inside. "Usually Nawabsaab sits here," Aman whispered. "It's his baithak."

"What do we do now?"

"I don't know. Usually the khansamah stands at the door and he takes us inside."

As the two boys stood thinking of what to do, an old woman, probably a maid, carrying a paan daan on a silver tray, came walking down the veranda. She glared at them and said, "What are you doing here?"

"I've come with jewellery from Rattan Seth's shop," Aman said.

"What jewellery?"

"Gold buttons," Irfan said quickly.

"Oh? How come the seth hasn't brought them himself? Open the box and let me see."

"Oh Allah, the box is empty," Irfan thought in panic. "Now we're in trouble!" But Aman, still looking very solemn, had pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket and said, "Sethji had said I'm not to open the box. See this, it's a letter from him to Nawabsaab. You can read it."

"Oh." The maid suddenly looked embarrassed. "She can't read," Irfan thought gleefully. "Theek hai, theek hai," she said quickly. "Go in, but be very quiet and polite. Nawabsaab's in a very bad temper today. His friend who plays chess with him every day hasn't come and Nawabsaab has to play with the khansamah."

"Really?" Irfan looked sympathetic. "The khansamah can't play?"

"He's terrible. He keeps making mistakes."

Very carefully, Aman parted the chik and the two boys peered in. As they quietly sidled into the room someone yelled inside, "You fool! You idiot! Can't you see you're going to lose your wazir?" Irfan was so scared he nearly ran out of the room again. Inside two men sat beside a large window. Before them was a marble table. The tabletop was made of black and white squares like a chessboard and on it were beautifully carved ivory chess pieces. Nawab Sarfaraz Khan was sitting up on his couch looking very irritated. The khansamah, a tall thin old man, sat facing him, staring worriedly at the chessboard.

As the boys came to stand near the table the Nawab looked up and said, "You two, whoever you are, keep quiet! Let him make his move first and try to save his wazir. You've

been playing with me for twenty years," he yelled again at his chess partner, "And you still play like a stupid khansamah!"

Irfan and Aman stood quietly watching. Irfan looked expertly at the chess game and thought, "The Nawab will win – he can get the black wazir in two moves." After long thought the khansamah made his move with the horse.

"No!" Irfan exclaimed. "You'll be checkmated."

The Nawab looked up curiously at Irfan as the khansamah hurriedly put the horse down. "Move the knight," Irfan said. "Block the white knight."

"You play?" the Nawab asked.

"Ji, a little."

"You go," the Nawab said to the relieved khansamah. "Play with me, beta."

"But, huzoor ...," Irfan and Aman protested.

"Yes. Yes. I'll listen to all you boys have to say. Now you finish this game. You can't win – that stupid man has messed it up, let's see how you do."

Irfan smiled to himself. He was going to give the Nawab a good fight. So, as Aman sat watching, Irfan played chess with Nawab Sarfaraz Khan. After two chess games, the second one a draw, the Nawab gave a sigh of satisfaction and said, "Ah! You play well, boy. What's your name?"

"I'm Irfan, huzoor, and this is my friend Aman ...," and then the two boys told the Nawab their story. Hearing how they tricked their way in with an empty jewellery box and an old shop bill, Sarfaraz Khan laughed heartily and said, "Well, you two are smart boys. Tell your brother to come tomorrow morning. I'll listen to him play."

Playing the two small tablas for a shehnai roshan chowki

performance needs a specially trained tabla player and Aftab asked the best man in town to play with him. Next morning the two brothers stood impatiently at their gate waiting. The man had not arrived and it was getting late.

"Let's go to the Nawab's house," Aftab said finally. "Maybe the tabalchi is waiting there. Still, to be safe," he said to Irfan, "You take your tablas with you. If he doesn't come you'll have to play with me."

"Oh Allah, no!" Irfan said nervously. "You're mad! I can't play before the Nawab."

"You accompany me at home."

"That's different. I haven't learnt enough to play for you in public."

"You'll have to. It's too late. So stop arguing."

They were in the Nawab's baithak again. The Nawab and his son sat surrounded by the family and servants. Aftab and Irfan sat before them. Aman was standing by the door and he looked as worried as Irfan. He knew his friend was no tabla player. Irfan looked at the tablas before him. His heart was thudding, his hands shaking with nerves. "Oh Allah," he thought, "If I make too many mistakes we are lost. Aftab will lose the chance and we'll stay poor forever." The room was silent as Aftab picked up his shehnai. Irfan took a deep breath and said to himself, "Here we go!"

Aftab played beautifully, Irfan didn't. Aftab first played a soft ghazal and then a quick, lively thumri and Irfan had never heard him play so well before. The soft notes of the shehnai were like a human voice singing. The roomful of people seemed to sway with the music. Nawab Sarfaraz Khan sat with his eyes closed, tapping a finger on the chair arm, keeping the beat.

It was lucky that the Nawab had his eyes closed. He didn't see the angry glare that Aftab gave when Irfan lost the beat. Or when he took up the beat too late and then had to quickly cover up. All through the performance Irfan tried to play as softly as possible as he prayed and sweated and then prayed some more.

Aftab played the last note and slowly put the shehnai down. The room was silent. The Nawab still sat with his eyes closed. The brothers and Aman were tensely waiting. The Nawab opened his eyes and said very softly, "Wah!" Aftab bowed. "Boy, you remind me of your father. You play like him." Aftab, Irfan and Aman were beginning to smile. "But you, Irfan, you were so bad you nearly spoiled your brother's performance."

"I know, huzoor." Irfan tried to apologize.

"You play chess much better," the Nawab told Irfan, "So I have jobs for both of you."

"Both of us?" Irfan asked, surprised.

"Yes," the Nawab said. "You, Aftab, will play the roshan chowki every evening when I have friends for dinner. And then you'll also play the nahbat at the gate when there are big celebrations like weddings in the house." He smiled at the excited Aftab. "You'll play only for me. I want to have Lucknow's best shehnai player to myself."

Irfan was feeling so happy he could have danced, when Sarfaraz Khan said, "And as for you, Irfan, you'll assist my khansamah and every morning you'll play chess with me."

Irfan grinned. "Well, huzoor, if you want I can also play the tabla."

"Never!" Nawab Sarfaraz Khan laughed. "Just play chess!"

MY FRIEND BHOURIE

Rashme Sehgal

Illustrated by Subba Ghosh

It was a clear, moonlit night and the stars shone in the summer sky. Pradeep sat crouched in one corner of the veranda trembling with horror. Three buffaloes dead in less than twenty four hours. The virus had spread so rapidly that before his father Kalua or he could send for the vet, the buffaloes had started having convulsions, collapsing on the ground in an agony of pain. Writhing and foaming from the mouth, they did not take long to die.

Yesterday evening, Pradeep had found the animals behaving restlessly. Suspecting a snake might have entered the cattle shed, he went over to investigate. He found one of the buffaloes hot with fever. Fetching a bucket of cold water, he placed a wet cloth on its forehead. The fever did not come down.

The pattern was repeated with the other two buffaloes. Now only Bhourie was alive. His best friend Bhourie, the buffalo who had changed his life.

At the other end of the veranda Kalua sat, tearing his hair in rage. "Twenty thousand rupees down the drain!" he

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moaned. "I'm finished! I'm ruined! I wish I were dead along with the cattle."

Pradeep was in no mood to console his father who, he felt, was partly to blame for this calamity. He had been warning him to get the cattle inoculated but Kalua, an old-fashioned man, did not put much faith in modern medicine and had instead sought the help of a snake charmer who gave him a brown-coloured potion to sprinkle around the cattle shed, promising it would ward off the evil eye. Much good that potion had done, thought Pradeep bitterly.

He went up to Bhourie and placed his left ear against her muzzle. Her breath seemed normal but he was not reassured. Supposing the virus attacked her as it had the others? She would not stand a chance. There was no point in taking the slightest risk. It was best to get her examined by the vet, Dr Jai Singh, who lived in the neighbouring village of Sahar, a good six miles away. He would inform his father of his decision.

"Baba, I'm taking Bhourie to the vet," he told him. Kalua was too dazed to reply. "Don't leave Ma alone in the house and disappear. Barkha and Sagar are coming home from Jaggu mama's house tomorrow morning. They will look after her," he told him.

Pradeep got up and went inside the hut. His mother, an invalid, lay on a broken down charpai. "Ma," he whispered, and felt himself choking. Each time he saw her shrivelled face and emaciated body, he wanted to cry out loud. He took her hand and patting it gently said, "I'll be coming back soon."

"Achcha," she murmured and pressed his hand.

He came outside and walked to the cattle shed. Untying the rope, he led Bhourie outside. Bhourie gave him a surprised stare. Not used to being disturbed at this late hour, she followed most unwillingly. "You're a lazy creature," grumbled Pradeep affectionately. "You don't want to move your legs, eh? I'm taking you for your good, but if we walk at this pace, we won't reach Sahar for another week."

Bhourie refused to quicken her pace and continued to walk slowly. Since their hut was at the edge of the village, it did not take much time to reach the narrow path which would take them to the village of Rehra, from where it joined the motorable road to Sahar.

The night was cool and luminous and the entire countryside was drenched in moonlight. The babul trees which lined the path looked a brilliant white, and salt crusted soil called kallar shone in the moonlight.

Pradeep was lost in a jumble of thoughts as he trudged forward, with his unwilling buffalo lumbering behind him. Several years ago, when still a young boy, a fortune-teller had told his mother she would become seriously ill. Mother, who was young and healthy and full of life, laughed when she heard it. She had never been sick in her life and was confident she would remain so. Pradeep had hated that man with the cold, evil and bird-like hands.

The loud cry of the sarus startled him and he stopped cold in his tracks. He stroked Bhourie's forehead for a while, and then feeling reassured, resumed walking. Both his sisters Barkha and Sagar were very young when mother had

fallen ill. Father had taken her for treatment to the nearby city of Kosi. She remained in the hospital for two months, and he stayed by her side. For three days there was no money or food in the house. On the fourth day, Pradeep decided to search for a job. Soon he was working as a farmhand, earning four rupees a day. Mother was brought back looking pale and thin. All day she lay moaning on the charpai. The girls clung to her and wept but soon they fell into the routine of housework and looking after her.

Every little while Pradeep had to stop and tug at the rope, for Bhourie's steps would start to falter. She would have been happy to return to the safety of the cattle shed. A hare bounded before them and got lost in some bushes. In the distance, he heard an owl hoot. His mind went back to the past again.

One morning his mother's eldest brother, Jaggu mama, had arrived with three thousand rupees in his pocket. "This money is for you, Kaushaliya," he had told Pradeep's mother. "After Father's death, this is your share of the property."

Kalua's eyes almost popped out of his sockets when he saw the money. He began to think of a thousand ways in which he could spend it. "I'll buy two bighas of land," he said. "I'll become a landowner at last."

"No," replied Jaggu mama. "Land is a gamble. It may return your investment, or it may leave you high and dry. I'm going to buy a buffalo for Kaushaliya. She's a sick woman who needs to drink plenty of milk. Pradeep can look after the animal and sell the surplus milk." And Jaggu mama returned that evening with a light brown-coloured buffalo called Bhourie, which gave six kilos of milk a day.

For a family which had never drunk milk, six kilos seemed like a bonanza. They used only one kilo, the remainder was sold, and at the end of the first month, after meeting all expenses, Pradeep netted a profit of four hundred rupees. Pradeep hid the money in an empty tin in one corner of the cowshed, for he was afraid if his father saw the money he might snatch it away.

Though he had felt proud at being able to save this money, what gave him the greatest thrill was being able to look after Bhourie and her calf. Bhourie with her kind, trustworthy eyes. Every time he brought fresh grass for her, she pushed her muzzle deep into the grass almost as though she were trying to savour its flavour before eating it.

Mother used to make excellent kheer with milk, rice and gur. That was long ago. Once in a while Barkha would try her hand at making kheer, the same way that mother used to. It tasted so good! Most of the profits from the milk were ploughed back into the business. Yet he always made sure there was plenty of milk in the house for mother to drink. With the profits he had bought two more buffaloes. Bhourie, though, remained his favourite. She was patient and obedient and never grumbled or kicked around even when he fed her last. One of the buffaloes that had died had been such an obstinate creature. He had never been able to milk her without first tying her forelegs.

"Now they're dead!" he muttered to himself. Bhourie was the first buffalo to have been bought, she should not be the last.

Bhourie's pace had become slower and her feet were

starting to drag. "Come on, Bhourie," he said, tugging at the rope. "We'll rest at Rehra."

They had almost reached the village of Rehra and he could see the thatched huts and pucca houses spread out on all sides. The houses were bathed in the soft moonlight and the silence of the night was broken by the loud cry of the sarus cranes. They rested for a while under the peepul tree. Then they climbed to the bridge from where the road turned a sharp right, flowing parallel to the Kosi-Agra canal.

They were walking at a snail's pace. Every few minutes he heard a splashing sound coming from the canal. It must be a fish darting or a water bird settling on the water, he thought. The sound reminded him of his mother throwing a bucket into the well and the water surging in from all sides and filling the bucket. That was also many years ago.

Bhourie was walking slower and slower and Pradeep was beginning to feel irritated. "You'd better hurry up, old girl," he said. Her steps were starting to falter. Suddenly she stumbled and collapsed on the ground, moaning in pain.

"The fever's got you!" he cried, trembling with terror. He felt her burning body. She was breathing hard and her legs were shaking. As he rubbed her legs, all kinds of desperate thoughts raced through his mind. Suppose she was unable to get up who would he turn to for help at this hour of the night? Supposing she died ... No! No! Bhourie was not going to die. Her dark black eyes ringed with white in the centre looked so trustingly into this eyes. He knew

she loved him as much as he loved her.

"Come on, get up! Nothing will happen to you!" He kept whispering these words over and over again as he willed her to get up. She must have understood for she struggled to her feet and took a few tentative steps.

"A few more ...," he pleaded. "Just a few more. We're almost there."

She took a few more steps, stopping all the while to rest. Her breath was coming much faster and he sensed that the fever was beginning to rise again.

The village of Sahar had been built on the slope of a hillock and consisted of a jumble of houses crowded haphazardly next to one another, giving the impression they might topple over. On the right side of the village was a large jheel, or pond. Dr Jai Singh's house was situated near the jheel and as Pradeep approached it, he became increasingly nervous. Suppose the doctor was not at home?

He knocked loudly at the front door. There was no response. He knocked even louder a second time. No reply. There were tears in his eyes as he started banging and kicking at the door.

"Who is it?" a voice asked grumpily from inside. "What do you want at this late hour?"

"Doctor Saheb! It's me, Pradeep from Nagla village," cried Pradeep desperately.

Dr Singh unlocked the door and peered outside, lantern in hand. "What is it you want?" he asked.

"Doctor Saheb, what can I say?" Pradeep burst into tears. "Last evening, out of the blue, my buffaloes started

having convulsions and within an hour they died. We didn't have time even to contact you. Bhourie is the only one who survived but even she is very ill. She will collapse any minute. Please save her."

"Son, I'll do my best," replied the doctor. "Let me examine her first."

Bhourie was led into the animals' enclosure. Going into the house, Dr Singh returned with a torch with which he examined her. "She's running high fever. If the virus has entered her brain, she doesn't stand a chance. I'll give her a vaccine shot. It will bring the fever down. If she survives the next twenty four hours, she'll pull through."

He administered the shot, rubbing her leg hard with some cotton. Then turning to Pradeep he said, "You've been lucky, the vaccine arrived just yesterday. We've been sending reminders all of last week."

Bhourie lay on the ground, head drooping to one side. Pradeep kept whispering, "You'll soon be all right. Don't worry." For the rest of the night and all the next day he stayed by her side, wetting her forehead with a towel to keep the fever down, comforting her with kind words.

Dr Singh found him in the evening, tired and exhausted. "We can't afford to have you falling sick, young fellow. You'd better go to my house and eat something. I'll sit with Bhourie till then."

Bhourie remained delirious for two days. On the third day, the fever came down. She was breathing more easily and even opened her eyes for a brief while.

"She'll pull through," Dr Singh told Pradeep, feeling her pulse.

"You're quite sure?"

"Positive. She'll be as good as new in a fortnight. You can take her home after a week."

Pradeep felt a wave of happiness rise in him. The last few days had been traumatic and had left him exhausted. Now everything would be all right. Barkha and Sagar would be pleased to see Bhourie, for they loved her as much as he did. Even mother cared for her even though she could not express herself – after all, she drank her milk twice a day. He rubbed his nose against her forehead. The long vigil was over at last.

THE JEWELLED DAGGER MYSTERY

Jacquelin Singh

Drawing by Ajit

"Just look at that, yaar!" Dee Kay exclaimed to Soody. He was pointing to a heavily locked showcase full of jewelled weapons on display in the Jaipur Museum.

Soody, who had been looking at some old suits of armour in another exhibit, hurried over. Tinkoo continued to study the old costumes that had attracted her attention from the first and that were displayed just inside the entrance to the first floor gallery where they all were.

When the Sehgal family had invited Dee Kay and Tinkoo to come along to Jaipur with them for a weekend, the two Boses jumped at the chance. Mr Sehgal had recently gone into the gem business after taking a course in gemology and Jaipur was a big centre for the trade. Mrs Sehgal had come along to visit one of her girlhood friends whose husband Madan Mohan – a superintendent of police – was currently stationed in the Pink City. That Friday morning she had gone to see her friend while Soggy went with his father on business rounds. Dee Kay, Tinkoo, and Soody

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had decided to have a look at the Museum before meeting Soggy and Mr Sehgal at twelve thirty in a gem dealer's shop.

The Museum exhibit that had got Dee Kay so excited was a collection of about ten daggers and knives of various sizes. They were all sharp and wicked-looking. Their handles were made of light green jade inlaid with gold and precious stones, worked in floral design. Some contained figures of parrots and peacocks.

"And they're really *old*," Dee Kay went on, pointing to the label beside the showcase. "Sixteenth and seventeenth century Mughal."

"Imagine what one of those would cost!" Soody said.

"Hundreds of thousands of rupees," a voice said behind them. Looking around they faced a middle-aged man wearing glasses. He had a scholarly look, and introduced himself as Mr Mathur, an art historian and assistant director of the Museum.

"But have a look at these shields over here," he said to the boys, leading them across the room to another showcase. "If you're interested in weapons and armour, nothing to beat these."

Before Mr Mathur could tell them anything about the display, he was called away by a security guard. The man seemed to be having some problem with another museum visitor, a foreigner with black curly hair. He could have been a Spaniard or an Italian, but he didn't look like the usual rich tourist. He was wearing shabby pants and a dirty T-shirt. He was about twenty five years old, tall, muscular and strong. The foreigner had caught hold of the security man, himself a stout fellow in a pink turban and big moustache, who seemed to be trying to explain something to him.

Tinkoo and the boys perked up their ears and kept their eyes open, all the while pretending to look at the various exhibits.

Mr Mathur went over to the other two and made a bid to stop what looked about to turn into a scuffle. All at once the foreigner let go of the guard. The guard opened the door of a storeroom, opening onto the exhibition hall, and the three men went inside.

At a sign from Dee Kay, Soody, who was nearest the storeroom, slipped behind the half open door in order to hear what the three inside were saying, and to get a look if he could.

At the same time, Dee Kay and Tinkoo made their way casually towards the exit to the outside that opened onto a veranda. Anybody leaving would have to come out that way.

Excitement wasn't long in coming. While the other two men stayed behind in the storeroom, the foreigner, who seemed to be in a rage, plunged through the door to the outside and ran down the steps two at a time. He was muttering something to himself in a strange language.

In a twinkling, Dee Kay motioned to Tinkoo to stay back while he sped quietly out of the door behind the foreigner just in time to see him drive off in a DLZ car. "Hardly the vehicle for someone dressed like him," Dee Kay told the others as they joined him on the veranda.

"No," Soody said slowly, "It hardly is."

Dee Kay and Tinkoo were burning to find out what Soody had overheard the three men say when they were inside the storeroom.

"I couldn't hear very well," he said. "But there was something about tomorrow night. Eight o'clock. I heard

Mathur say something about the Pink City Villa."

"Our hotel!" exclaimed Tinkoo.

By that time the three were getting late for their appointment with Mr Sehgal and Soggy and had not a minute more to consider the puzzling happenings they'd just witnessed. Outside in the bazaar again, everything seemed bright and confusing. One small lane led into another, and there were lots of people and carts and cattle pushing through.

"I think we're lost," Soody said after a few moments. "We've been down this lane twice already."

He took out the slip of paper on which his father had written the gem dealer's address, and Dee Kay asked a passer-by the direction to it. After two unsuccessful tries and two more willing but unhelpful passers-by, the three were getting anxious.

At last a boy of about their age, who was hurrying along one of the lanes, promised to take them to the very shop if they could just come with him for a few moments while he dropped off a packet at his father's workplace. It seemed a good offer. And Dee Kay, Tinkoo, and Soody soon found themselves blinking into a dark hovel in which an old artisan sat working. Hari, the boy, quickly gave his father the packet and explained to the others that theirs was an old family of Jaipur artists. They used to do gold inlay work, but now the demand was for cheap items that would sell on the local tourist market. "My father is Narain Dass, and we are the last in the line of an old family doing this work," Hari said proudly.

While he was talking, Dee Kay peered over the low counter where Narain Dass sat working. Before he could

take it all in, it was time to rush off to meet Mr Sehgal and Soggy. But in his mind's eye, Dee Kay carried with him the image of the two jade dagger handles that he saw lying side by side on Narain Dass' work bench. They were identical, or seemed so, in every way.

With Hari's help the three soon found the shop they were looking for and the others awaiting them. They were bursting to tell Soggy what they'd seen and heard at the Museum. But there was no opportunity.

By the time they reached the Pink City Villa, it was well into the lunch hour and the dining room was crowded. Several foreigners stayed at the place, in spite of the fact that it was not a five-star establishment. At the table next to theirs, for example, sat a French couple. On honeymoon? Then there was the quiet Signor Martini. He was an Italian businessman. That was all anyone knew about him. A family of Japanese, each with a camera, shared a centre table. They had been seen at every tourist spot in the vicinity of Jaipur.

Mrs Sehgal phoned to say she was having lunch with her friend, so that left the others to settle down to talk about gems. Tinkoo asked about some of the earrings and bangles in enamel work she had seen in the Museum, and Dee Kay and Soody were full of questions about the daggers studded with precious stones that they had seen.

"The sign said they were sixteenth century," Dee Kay said. "How can you tell the age of something like that, Mr Sehgal?"

"Well, I'm no art historian or anything," Mr Sehgal said. "I could tell you if the gems were real or not, but I wouldn't know how to judge the age. Experts have ways of studying such artifacts under high powered

magnification and so on."

"What difference does age make, anyway?" Soggy asked. "I mean, if the stones are real and all, who cares how old a thing is?"

"Age makes a great difference in the price, young man," Mr Sehgal said. "The market for antiques in the art world is a big one, and millions of dollars are to be made – often illegally."

"How's that?" Tinkoo wanted to know.

"One way it's done," Mr Sehgal explained, "Is to have copies made of the originals. These antiques are sold to foreign buyers who smuggle them out of the country while the copies end up in Indian museums. It's always done with the connivance of ..." Mr Sehgal suddenly stopped talking and looked at Soody in alarm. Everybody else looked at Soody too.

"What's the matter, son?" Mr Sehgal asked.

"I'll be okay," Soody said, getting up quickly. "I'm just sick to my stomach." He rushed out of the dining room holding one hand over his mouth and the other over his stomach! He was white as a sheet.

On his way upstairs to his room he got a glimpse of the hotel lobby. In one corner two people stood talking. They were the artisan's boy Hari and the curly-headed foreigner they had seen with the security man at the Museum in the morning! Soody was sure – the same shabby pants and dirty T-shirt. And the same bullying manner. Hari seemed apologetic, even scared. Soody was about to wave to him, but thought better of it. Besides, he was in a desperate hurry to get upstairs.

Minutes later everyone was upstairs to see if Soody

was okay. Mrs Sehgal returned and administered the medicine she always took along on trips for such emergencies, and went to her own room for a rest. Mr Sehgal went off again on business, while Dee Kay, Tinkoo, and Soggy stayed back to keep poor Soody company ... and, more importantly, to hold an official meeting of the four amateur investigators.

It was time to fill Soggy in on all that had happened in the Museum that morning while he was out with his father looking at gems.

"What could you see inside the store?" Soggy asked his twin.

"Enough to find my way around it in the dark," Soody said.

"You can't find your way around anything in your state," Soggy reminded him.

"Maybe not," Soody said, rubbing his sore stomach. "But perhaps you three ..."

They had a case on, all right. Nobody needed to spell *that* out. But at the moment, none of the pieces fitted together.

"Hey, wait," said Soody, "One more odd thing. I saw Hari, the artisan's son, in the lobby as I came up. He was talking to that curly-headed foreigner we saw in the museum ..."

Just then Dee Kay remembered what he had seen on Narain Dass' work bench that morning – the two jade dagger handles, inlaid with gems lying side by side!

Friday afternoon, sitting by Soody's bedside, Dee Kay told the others about the dagger handles he had seen that morning at Narain Dass' workshop. That meant the shop

as well as the Museum needed to be closely watched.

"It looks like Narain Dass may be mixed up in some sort of art swindle," Tinkoo said. "Why should there be two dagger handles just alike, and both almost identical to those in the Museum?"

They had also not forgotten what Soody had overheard Mathur say about a meeting at the Pink City Villa at eight o'clock the following night. They had only a little more than twenty four hours to sort out the strands of the mystery that was rapidly unfolding.

"I've got an idea." Dee Kay said. "See if you think it will work ..."

On Saturday evening Soody, who was still getting over his stomach upset, stayed behind, as their contact man at the hotel ... in case of an emergency. Mr and Mrs Sehgal were going out to dinner at the Police Superintendent Madan Mohan's house, and agreed to Soggy's request that he, Tinkoo, and Dee Kay be dropped off at the Jantar Mantar, the old astronomical observatory in the centre of town not far from the Museum. Soggy's idea that they'd like to watch the full moon from the observatory was something his parents could hardly object to.

"Be back at the hotel before eight o'clock, though," Mr Sehgal said. "Soody's by himself. He'll want company, and we may be late getting back after dinner."

The three got down at the observatory, but after a brief look around, rushed to put their plan into action.

"Before this night is over," Dee Kay said, "We should know if what we suspect is true: that priceless antiques are being stolen from the Jaipur Museum, and possibly even smuggled out of the country. Let's go!"

He left Tinkoo and Soggy near the Museum and sped off down the crowded lanes towards Narain Dass' workroom. When he reached there, both the father and his son Hari seemed surprised to see him and ill at ease, besides. However, Narain Dass smiled with pleasure when Dee Kay said he had come back to the shop because he was interested in how he did the intricate inlay work in jade.

"Those two dagger handles, for instance," Dee Kay said, pointing to the pair he had seen in the morning and which still lay on the workbench. "How did you get the idea for them?" he asked.

Narain Dass explained that one of them was not his. It was a sample a customer had left with him to copy. The other was his own work. "It's a beauty, isn't it? It's not often I get a chance to do traditional work like this." He handed Dee Kay one of the daggers to hold.

"It's neat," Dee Kay said, swallowing hard. The man seemed to be totally unaware of what he was involved in. There was nothing wrong in making copies as such. But, Dee Kay explained, suppose the person who ordered it intended to palm the copy off as an original? That would be a criminal matter and Narain Dass would be very much implicated in it.

When the frail man heard this, he was at first full of disbelief. "Mr Mathur, my customer, is a respectable gentleman."

At the mention of Mathur's name, Dee Kay made mental connections as lightning-quick as an electrical circuit. "Go on," he said.

"He is a scholar," Narain Dass continued. "I was just fulfilling an order."

"You could be aiding a thief and a smuggler," Dee Kay warned him.

At this, the man turned pale. He wanted to clear himself.

"You may be able to stay out of trouble if you both help me," Dee Kay said to them.

"But Mr Mathur is coming any minute to pick these up," Narain Dass said, indicating the daggers. "What'll I do?"

"Give them to him," Dee Kay said. "The rest Hari and I will do. Just listen ..."

No sooner had Dee Kay explained his plan to them than there was a knock at the door. Mr Mathur had turned up. In a flash, the boys concealed themselves behind the curtain dividing the shop from the living quarters.

As soon as Mathur took delivery of the daggers, each in a separate packet, and left the shop, the two boys dashed out after him. But before they had taken more than a dozen strides into the lane, they were seized by two pairs of powerful hands that almost crushed their shoulder bones!

Twisting around, Dee Kay recognized the big curly-headed foreigner. An Indian tough was with him. The boys wrenched themselves free, but the two men blocked their retreat back into the workshop. There was nothing to do but run!

"This way," Hari gasped as they ran. "We'll ditch them in here."

He turned into yet another narrow lane behind the Hawa Mahal, a building with just a facade, a front. The back was merely a series of exposed stairways and landings. It loomed skyward straight above them.

"Come on, hurry!" Hari urged. He hopped up onto a

staircase that had no hand rail, no side support. Dee Kay never regretted being so short for his age as much as at that moment. Hari reached down to grab his hand to help him up. At the same time Dee Kay felt a firm grip around his right ankle. For three seconds he was the object in a tug-of-war between Hari and one of the thugs. Dee Kay kicked with all his might and got free once again. In an instant he was beside Hari on a landing. But there was no time to catch his breath. The two toughs were right behind the boys.

Dee Kay and Hari fought their way up the steep stairs, level after level, battling for breath every inch of the way.

"Quick, in here!" Hari motioned Dee Kay into a small alcove. "I know every inch of this place. We used to play here in the Hawa Mahal as kids."

The two boys leaned flat against a wall in the alcove and listened. There was no sound, except the muffled noises from the street many feet below.

"Have we lost them?" Hari whispered.

Before Dee Kay could answer, they froze with alarm. They heard the soft crunch of tennis shoes on the worn stone steps not more than five feet away. They flattened themselves even tighter against the wall of the alcove into which moonlight flooded. Only their side was dark.

The silhouettes of the two powerful men suddenly appeared against the stone wall opposite their alcove. A pebble fell loose from the wall against which the boys hid, and hearing the noise, the two thugs lunged into the alcove. With energy Dee Kay didn't know he had, he rammed into the curly-headed foreigner with all his might. Hari took a cue from this and tackled the second fellow. Both men lost their balance and fell backward. Only a small ledge

prevented them from plunging to the ground thirty feet below. They cursed and swore, as each tried to fix the blame on the other. The boys exploited their momentary advantage by climbing up the next flight of steep stairs. Looking down, Dee Kay wondered what it would feel like to lose his balance and go tumbling from that height. But there was no time to wonder for long, because the foreigner and his companion had recovered themselves by then and were gaining on Hari and Dee Kay.

"We've got one chance left." Hari whispered to Dee Kay as they crept along an unprotected ledge not far from the top of the Hawa Mahal. "Follow me, and don't look down!"

Meanwhile, Soggy, following Tinkoo's lead slipped under the back gate of the Museum and climbed the wall onto the veranda outside the exhibit room. Next to the exhibit room was the storeroom. They waited for their chance, and it came when the security man came outside for a bidi. While the man had his back turned, the two entered the exhibit hall and saw that the store was open. In an instant they were inside the store hiding behind some packing boxes.

Outside they could hear the security man talking to someone. It was Mathur! Tinkoo recognized his voice. The two men came into the storeroom. Tinkoo and Soggy stopped breathing.

"Here, take this packet. Keep it here," Mathur said to the guard. "And if Micky or Arjun Dass show up tell them I've gone straight to the Pink City Villa."

Tinkoo and Soggy looked at one another. Then all at once Tinkoo let out a squeal. A mouse had run over her toes. Quickly she put her hands over her mouth. But the

damage had been done. In no time they were hauled out of their hiding place by the security man.

"So it's the curious little girl and her friend of yesterday!" Mathur exclaimed in surprise. "What are you doing here? Where's that little runt of a friend of yours who was here yesterday too?"

Tinkoo and Soggy were at a loss for words.

"Whatever it is, you'll be prosecuted for trespassing. And now the guard will do his duty and lock up this place. He doesn't know you're in here. I don't know you're in here. If anyone has any explaining to do in the morning when the Director comes and discovers you, it will be you yourselves!"

Locked inside the store, Tinkoo and Soggy sat listening to the minutes tick away on a clock in the exhibit hall.

"I've got an idea," Tinkoo said. "I hope it works."

Within minutes a terrible racket was heard coming from inside the storeroom. There was the scraping of packing boxes along the floor, of things being thrown around, and loud banging on the door. The security man rushed to see what was happening. He unlocked the door and ran inside. He looked around, puzzled, and then realized he'd been made a fool of as Soggy and Tinkoo, taking advantage of his confusion ran past him and out the door. They slammed it shut and Soggy leaned against it as Tinkoo fastened the bolt. Now it was the guard's turn to bang on the door.

"Let's get out of here," Soggy said. "We shouldn't ..."

His words stopped in his throat. Just then he saw shadows outside the veranda. Tinkoo swallowed hard and Soggy sucked in his breath.

Fear soon turned into smiles when they saw the

intruders were Dee Kay and Hari. They were dirty, their clothes were torn, and their hands were scratched and bleeding. But there was no time for explanations now.

"What's going on?" Dee Kay asked Soggy, indicating the storeroom door.

Soggy told Dee Kay and Hari what the situation was.

"We'll let you out," Dee Kay shouted through the door to the guard. "But first tell us where the telephone is and also hand over the packet Mathur left with you."

Talking fast, Soggy persuaded the guard to cooperate. "It's for your own good," he warned. "This very minute my parents are having dinner with Police Superintendent Madan Mohan. He can have his man arrest you in no time."

By the time Soody, sitting by the telephone in his hotel room, got their message, it was nearing eight o'clock, the time they had overheard Mathur mention for the meeting. He called the Superintendent of Police and was able to convince him that there was an emergency and that a police trap should be organized at the Pink City Villa as fast as possible. "Tell our parents not to worry, or anything," he asked the Superintendent. "We're all okay."

As Tinkoo, Soggy, Dee Kay, and Hari ran down the stairs of the Museum and out into the street, they were more than excited to realize it would be only a few minutes more before they found out who the mystery man was to whom Mathur would hand over the priceless jewelled dagger. They hailed two three-wheeler scooters and drove off as fast as they could to the hotel. It was five minutes to eight.

Meanwhile, at the Pink City Villa, Superintendent Madan Mohan and some of his plain-clothesmen had

arrived even sooner than the young detective had dared hope. Soody was called down to the lobby.

He rushed out of his room. But two steps past his door he suddenly stopped short. Coming out of the lift on his floor was Mr Mathur! Soody quickly hid behind some decorative grillwork and held his breath as he watched Mathur walk past him down the hall and knock on Room Thirty Nine. It was just the information the police needed to close in and draw the net tight. He went back inside his own room and telephoned the message to the Superintendent.

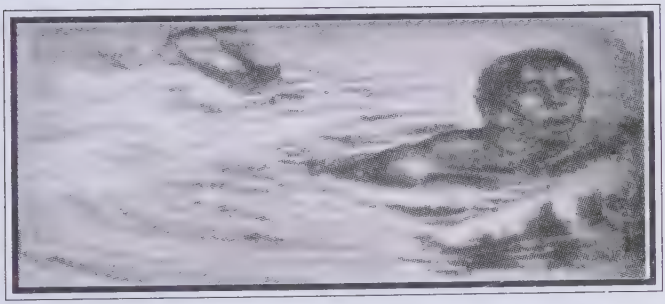
Dee Kay, Tinkoo, Soggy and Hari reached the Pink City Villa out of breath. The lobby hummed with an undercurrent of activity. There was Superintendent Madan Mohan, and the Sehgal parents.

All at once the four stood electrified. Out of the lift stepped a smiling Soody followed by Mathur, handcuffed to a plain-clothes policeman. Finally, escorted by another plain-clothesman, came Signor Martini, the quiet businessman! The two had been caught red-handed in Room Thirty Nine, where the Italian smuggler was staying, Mathur receiving cash in exchange for the jewelled antique dagger stolen from the Museum.

"Those toughs gave you and Hari a bad time," Soody remarked afterwards. "But that was quite a feat you pulled giving them the slip at the top of the Hawa Mahal and climbing all the way down the front of the building. How did you do it?"

"We used the jali work for footholds," Dee Kay said. "I wouldn't like to try it again," he added with a grin.

THE CHAMP



Indira Ananthakrishnan

Illustrated by Suddhasattwa Basu

Vijay was practising on the parallel bars in the gymnasium, while Mr Rao, the sports master, was putting away the hockey sticks. Vijay saw Bhasker, the swimming coach come in, calling out to Mr Rao, "Imagine a swim across the river with hands tied at the back and feet bound at the ankles. What do you think of that?"

Mr Rao raised his eyebrows. Vijay let go of the bars and jumped down. "How strange!" he thought.

Mr Rao remarked, "No one would ever try such a crazy thing. If anyone did, I'd hail him as the Do-it-the-Hard-Way Champion."

"Sir!" Vijay called as he came running up. "Sir, I couldn't help hearing what you said. It's an amazing idea, sir. Could ... could I try a swim like that?"

"Well," said Bhasker after a little thought. "You are the school swimming champ, and I admire your enthusiasm. But think carefully. It's not going to be easy."

"I'm game to try, sir."

"Well ... in that case, I'm game to coach you," said

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Bhasker, and both of them laughed. Mr Rao shrugged his shoulders.

Coaching lessons began from the very next day. "It's a bit like a dolphin," Bhasker explained. "You plunge in and out of the water, kicking with both your legs together."

After three days, Vijay was ready to have his hands and feet tied up before plunging in the water. With bound limbs, he made a clumsy dive and splashed a lot of water around. He tried to kick ahead, but he rolled helplessly, barely managing to float. He swallowed large quantities of water.

Bhasker hauled him out of the pool. "How do you feel?" he asked. Vijay coughed, spluttered and grinned. "Not too good. But I'd like to try again."

Long hours of gruelling practise followed. In a month, Vijay felt he was ready to take the plunge in the river and fight his way across.

The great day dawned bright and beautiful. It was a Sunday. The swim across the kilometre wide river was scheduled to start at ten o'clock in the morning. Well before that, a large and excited crowd, including Mr Rao and a lot of boys, had gathered at the riverside, not far from the school. At ten, Vijay stood at the very edge of the water, with his hands tied behind him and feet bound at the ankles. His body glistened with oil, smeared on to retain his body heat, and to prevent fish from troubling him. Bhasker gave Vijay the thumbs-up sign.

"If you get across, we'll both be famous. Good luck!" he said cheerfully, and stepped back. Vijay smiled faintly and concentrated on the water. He took a few deep breaths and then dived in without a splash. With vigorous kicks, he

began to propel himself forward.

"Breathe ... kick ... plunge ... breathe ... kick ... plunge ...," he plunged through the water, rhythmically. The crowd yelled, "Come on, Vijay! ... Keep it up, Vijay!"

Vijay made good headway. "I'm going well," he thought. "It isn't really so difficult."

He was almost halfway across, when a powerful tug in the water disturbed his rhythm. His strong kicks were getting him nowhere. Instead, a current was sweeping him downstream, threatening to swirl over him and pull him down. He struggled to keep himself afloat. He spluttered and spat. Suddenly a terrible helplessness overcame him.

"Oh god! I'm drowning," he thought in despair. With one last effort, he twisted himself onto his back and gasped, "Help! Save me!"

As his head went underwater again, Vijay felt a strong push under his back. He surfaced. He felt the cords that bound his limbs being cut. Through the water haze, he saw Bhasker beside him. The next moment, he fainted. When he came to his senses he was ashore. The rescue boat was moored nearby. Mr Rao patted Vijay's bare wet back, comfortingly.

"Better luck next time, my boy," he said.

"A good attempt, Vijay," said his friends.

"Thinks he can work wonders, eh?" remarked some others. Soon the crowd dispersed. Bhasker and Vijay were the last to leave.

"Sir ... you warned me ... but ... I took up the challenge ... foolishly ... and now, I've let you down badly ...," Vijay stammered in a choked voice. "Forget about

this Vijay. You can try again some time later," Bhasker consoled him.

"Oh no, sir! I wouldn't dream of making a fool of myself again," Vijay said quickly. He turned towards the river and scowled. "I hate the sight of that river. I'll never go near it again."

The two of them walked in silence the rest of the way home.

In the days that followed, Vijay remained moody and sullen. He avoided Bhasker, and kept to himself. One Saturday afternoon he sauntered along the river's edge, lost in thought. He glanced at a paddle steamer churning its way down the river, taking vacationers on a jolly trip. People stood near the rails, waving to Vijay as they passed.

All of a sudden, there was commotion on the deck. A dog barked; a boy cried out. The next moment the dog fell off the deck, into the water.

"Mama! Rexie!" the boy yelled and jumped after the dog. "The ... the dog – they'll drown ...," thoughts flashed like lightning in Vijay's mind. He tore off his shirt and dived into the water. With quick powerful strokes, he swam in search of the boy and the dog. Soon, he hit rough water, churned up by the steamer's paddles. Buffeted by the slapping waves, he caught a glimpse of the dog bobbing up, a metre away. He plunged forward, grabbed the little dog and threw him out of the wake of the steamer to calmer waters.

Where was the child? Shaking the water out of his eyes, and gasping for breath, Vijay searched around anxiously. In a couple of seconds, he saw a tiny hand rise above the swirling waves. He plunged forward and caught hold of it. The weight of the child pulled him down. His

strength was giving out. But, with a determined effort, he turned himself on his back. He caught the child under his chin, and kicked his way out of the rough waters towards the safety of the bank. Just ahead of him he saw the little dog paddling furiously.

There was a lot of excitement on the shore. Somebody pulled Vijay out of the river. For a while he lay exhausted on the ground while the crowd fussed over the boy and his dog. Vijay got up and quietly walked away.

That evening, Bhasker met him.

"Hey, Vijay, weren't you the hero of this morning's drowning incident?" Bhasker asked earnestly.

"Yes, sir. How did you know?"

"Mr Rao saw you. By the time he pushed his way through the crowd, you were gone." Bhasker threw an arm across Vijay's shoulders and they walked slowly in silence. Suddenly Vijay said softly, "Sir, let me make one more attempt at swimming the hard way."

"Hear, hear! That's my Vijay!"

A week later, Vijay was ready for the swim. Early in the morning, a big crowd collected on both sides of the water.

"Will he do it this time?"

"No one can do such a crazy thing."

"Don't underestimate Vijay!"

"Let's see!" the excited crowd speculated.

At ten' o'clock sharp Vijay, tense but determined, dived into the water. He shot ahead and swam steadily, "Breathe … kick … plunge ... breathe … kick … plunge …," till he was halfway across the river. Here he braced himself to fight the midstream current.

"Ah! There you are," he told himself as he felt the first tug of it. "This time you are not going to beat me." He tried to keep up his rhythmic movements and kicked more strongly than before. Still he was pulled downstream. He threw up his head and took a deep breath. He kicked his legs, plunged and dashed forward. But this time too he felt the powerful downstream pull. He tensed up and began to sink under the brown, swirling waters. He tried to surface to take a breath, but he was pulled down and he gulped a large mouthful of water.

With all his remaining strength, Vijay struggled with the ropes that tied his limbs. But the cords that bound him were strong. They would not give way whatever he did.

"Relax!" Suddenly he heard Bhasker's old instructions ringing in his ears. "If you want to float, relax."

He twisted onto his back and for a moment stopped struggling, letting the stream carry him along as he breathed deeply and regained control of himself. "I won't drown," he thought. "I *will* get across."

He took a quick breath, turned over and kicked powerfully with strong, rhythmic beats. In a few seconds, he felt a sudden lightness. He was cutting smoothly through the waves.

"So that's bye-bye to you, dear current," he thought. Vijay swam on steadily and soon his legs scraped the sandy bottom near the shore. Strong hands pulled him out of the water, and the next moment, Bhasker was hugging him.

Mr Rao cried, "Three cheers for the Do-it-the-Hard-Way Champion!" and the crowd added, "Hip! Hip! Hooray!!!"

HOW CHIMBWI BECAME THE HERO OF THE VALLEY!

Reeta Dutta Gupta

Illustrated by Suddhasattwa Basu

Spring was in the air. Everywhere in the great Luangwa Valley, trees, shrubs and bushes wore crowns of tender leaves – lime, pink and rust. The flowering trees put out masses of soft, fragrant blossoms. The birds flew about in their brightest feathers. Busy they were, building nests. The elephants moved about in great bands, trumpeting and stopping to feed on the Wait-a-Bit thorn trees, completely disregarding their sharp hooks. The lions rested contentedly and watched with half-closed eyes their cubs at play in the tall golden grass.

"That one is going to grow up just like me!" remarked Father lion as he proudly watched his son wrestling with his sister.

"Ah!" Mama lion replied. "My daughter is going to give great chase some day and feed a whole pride! Just like me!"

In another part of the Valley, the zebras stood in groups of four and six and looked over their backs to see that no lion was following them. The giraffes reached up with their long necks to the top of the trees, wound their snake-like tongues around clusters of young leaves and pulled them

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into their mouths for an early breakfast. The antelopes sprang about the Valley without apparent reason. And the great fat hippos yawned on the river banks. Indeed, the great Valley was a riot of colour and a scene of perfect contentment.

Mulungu, the Great Spirit, moved about on a wafting cloud, surveying the scene below. He was happy to see His most favourite Valley on earth, a home of peace and serenity and happiness. Just as He had intended it to be!

But what was that unpleasant sound that suddenly came to His ears? Who was it crying that He heard? An unhappy little voice in the middle of happiness?

"Mulungu, O Mulungu! You've not been fair to me. You've made me so tiny and insignificant. Why? Why did you not make me as big as the lion or the cheetah whom everyone fears and respects?" the voice cried tearfully.

At once Mulungu let down his sunbeam ladder from the sky and slid down it to the complaining voice. He saw it was a tiny beetle crying. A bright metallic green fruit chaffer with beautiful white bands! Mulungu was surprised that such a colourful insect should be unhappy with itself.

In a kind but firm voice, Mulungu said: "But little one, you are gorgeous! Besides, spring is in the air! Everyone is rejoicing, except you. In my scheme of things no one is great. No one small. Everyone is equally loved by me. Even the smallest of creatures in my kingdom has an important job to do. And everyone by doing his or her work attains the greatest happiness. So rejoice my beetle, rejoice! Look around. This is a paradise I've created for you, my beautiful creatures!"

But the little beetle was unconsoled. He continued to

argue with the Great One: "But Mulungu, no one looks at my bright colours because I'm so small. No one cares to know me! No one notices me! Do make me as big as the lion or the cheetah!"

Mulungu burst into a laugh at the beetle's ambition. But he had more important things to do, to help creatures who really needed His attention. So, moving up the sunbeam ladder, He called back, "What Mulungu has created with love must not be changed. So do be happy with yourself!" Saying this Mulungu, the Most Beautiful One, floated away on His cloud. And the little beetle sat on a twig doing nothing for a very, very long time until it was time to go to bed.

Nearby Ngulu, the Guardian of the Bush, lived in a big stone that lay at the foot of a tall anthill in a field of thorny shrubs. He was the local god of the Bush, and all the animals of the Valley offered him sacrifices and seasonally performed rituals to him to keep him pleased. And though he was a lesser being than Mulungu, the Creator, he nevertheless had complete control over the rain, drought and wind. He had often heard the beetle cry, but that night he decided to go and find out for himself the reason for the beetle's unhappiness.

Ngulu floated in the night air and reached the beetle's house of leaf, and spoke in a deep nasal tone: "Tell me, beetle, the reason for your woe."

The beetle was greatly surprised to see Ngulu himself come to his door. But he was only too pleased to tell him of his great ambition to become big and powerful so that all the creatures of the Valley took notice of him. At first, Ngulu

did not reply but after thinking for a long while he answered, "I think I may do something for you, but in order that I may work my magic, you will have to first perform the right ceremony to please me. And remember I'm the Night Spirit. So you will have to perform the ceremony only at night." Saying this Ngulu blew away with the pleasant night breeze.

The next morning, the beetle woke up as soon as the sun was up and got himself busy preparing for Ngulu's ritual. He scurried from shrubs to bushes looking for Salt Bush and Rhino Thistle leaves and a Wild Dog's nail. Then, he made a potion of it all by boiling it, and waited for the night to fall.

At last night came and the beetle sat down beneath a thorn bush, spat thrice, drank the potion and began to chant aloud:

Pleased be Ngulu, Uhumm, Uheem
Eh ha!
Pleased be the Spirit of the Bush,
Uhemm Ha ha!
Pleased be the Night Spirit,
Uhemm, Uhemm, Eh Ha!

And just as he spat thrice again, he suddenly felt he was becoming bigger and bigger, until he became, to his great joy, a big dog-like creature with a massive head and rather short ears. He wore a yellow-grey coat with a short mane made of brown hair that extended from behind the ears to the top of the shoulders. He also had a tail – a short bushy one tipped with black.

"Ngulu be praised!" the new creature cried out. And though Ngulu did not appear, his voice replied through the

air: "Henceforth, beetle, you shall be called Chimbwi, the Hyaena!"

Delighted, Chimbwi retired to his house for the night. But did he not need a bigger house now? So at once he set himself to digging out a den, which was not easy in the dark. When it was done, he went to bed feeling exhausted with excitement and work.

The next morning, Chimbwi got up early and dashed out of his hole to enjoy his new life. Oh! How wonderful it was to be a big creature, he thought as he began to pace up and down in front of his den feeling proud of himself. Just then he saw two impalas pass by. He decided to try out his might by running down the antelopes. But alas! As he made what he thought was a swift move towards the impalas, Chimbwi realized he had an ugly gait with a weak, sloping back. The impalas were runners and they escaped easily.

Chimbwi was now utterly disappointed. He sat the whole day long doing nothing, without food and water, counting his misfortunes. And when night came, he set out to meet Ngulu in his field of thorns. "You've fooled me! You've fooled me!" Chimbwi cried desperately as Ngulu was about to set out for a night walk to the far end of the Valley. "You've made me big but I'm of no use! I can't even run down the silly antelopes for a meal," Chimbwi frowned.

Ngulu, the Spirit of the Bush was kind. He always wished to see the creatures of the Valley happy and content. He wanted to do all he could for Chimbwi but there was not much he could do as he was lesser than Mulungu. Nevertheless, after deliberating for a while as to how he could fulfil Chimbwi's desire to be like the lion or the cheetah, he said, "Look Chimbwi, my power is limited to

the night. And I cannot do anything I like as Mulungu can. But since I want to see you happy, I shall do my best for you. I cannot make you into a hunter like the lion or the cheetah but, henceforth, you shall feed on the kills the cheetah and the lion make. You shall scavenge from now on and become a meat-eater but you will have to be content with being a nocturnal creature. For you are now under the protection of the Night Spirit." Saying this, Ngulu vanished into thin air.

There was little Chimbwi could do now. He had to be happy being a big night fellow. Slowly he made his way to his den. Then, as he passed a tamarind tree, he saw Bush-Baby dancing on the twig of a tree. When it saw Chimbwi, it stopped in the middle of its dance, haughtily threw up its head in the air and remarked: "Huh! What in the world is this queer, ugly thing passing my tamarind tree? I've not seen it before. It has some spots of the cheetah but sure enough that's an imitation! Tut, tut! No use being simply big and huge if you're ugly. I may be small but who can dance like me? Now, One ... two ... three ... One ..." The Bush-Baby resumed its gyrations.

Chimbwi's heart sank as he heard the Bush-Baby's words. Just then a cheetah came by but it hardly took any notice of the Hyaena. Instead, it made a friendly gesture towards the Bush-Baby and lifting up one of its paws, jovially remarked, "Ha! Ha! How is the little one tonight? Dancing as usual! I must take time off one of these nights to sit here and watch you! You know, you set our hearts on fire with your movements!" The cheetah winked and went its way.

Chimbwi's ears began to burn with envy and his mane became stiff with hurt pride. "Ngulu has not given me what

I had really wanted," Chimbwi thought with a sigh. And instead of returning to his territory, he changed direction and went back straight to the field of thorns where he had met Ngulu only a while ago.

When Chimbwi reached Ngulu's stone house, he found to his surprise Ngulu actually waiting for him. And before he could say anything, Ngulu said, "Chimbwi, I knew you would come back again. And that is why I've been waiting for you. But it will be the last time you find me. For I've only the power to give three gifts. I've made you big. I've made you into a meat-eater. But since you're still not satisfied, I shall give my last gift to you. Henceforth, you will have the most eerie and terrifying call that will make all creatures both great and small know that it is the Hyaena calling. But do not seek me again. I can do no more for you." And Ngulu faded into the darkness.

Chimbwi was delighted with the new gift that Ngulu gave him. To try out his call he at once gave out a loud cry – a long laughing note. It was a rare call indeed, a sort of drawn out moan which rose quickly to a high-pitched scream. Chimbwi was absolutely thrilled with himself. But dawn was breaking at the horizon. So he hurried back to his den.

"Tomorrow night I shall impress the creatures of the Valley with my call. Tomorrow night shall belong to me," Chimbwi assured himself and retired to his den, waiting for nightfall.

The next night, Chimbwi walked out into the heart of the Valley with great expectations. And as he walked, he gave out sharp, loud cries and cackled with laughter. Sure

enough, his call had the desired effect! A hush fell in the Valley, a star shot across the velvet sky, and owls flew off trees in a flutter. That was it! Chimbwi was greatly pleased with himself. But alas! Just when he thought he had made a deep impression on the animals of the forest, he heard them whispering about him.

"That's the Hyaena calling," said a voice. "Hush! It's a frightening call but they say there is nothing to be afraid of. He is no hunter. He is only a scavenger. He feeds on leftover meat from the lion's kills."

Another voice replied, "That's right. The Hyaena is no hunter. We wild dogs may be small but we are great hunters and even the lion is afraid of our pack!"

"That's it!" a third voice added. "Better be small and beautiful than be big and ugly! Haven't you seen what an ugly gait the Hyaena has?"

Chimbwi's heart broke as he heard the animals talk. Quickly he limped away, as fast as he could to his den. And all the time he was acutely aware of his ungainly walk. "I'm big now but I'm so ugly! And I'm a just a scavenger!" Chimbwi cursed himself. Maybe it was far better being a small colourful insect than a big creature that no one likes! When he reached his den, he sat down with a sigh and vacantly watched the moon ... the stars ... and the clouds floating by like the veil of a heavenly being. And as he looked on and on, he began to experience a strange peace in his mind. He felt he lost his desire to be big and known, or greater than he actually was. He saw the stars were tiny, shiny dots in the night sky but they were nonetheless gorgeous and it was the stars that made the night beautiful! Suddenly to his surprise, he saw a shaft of moonbeam reach

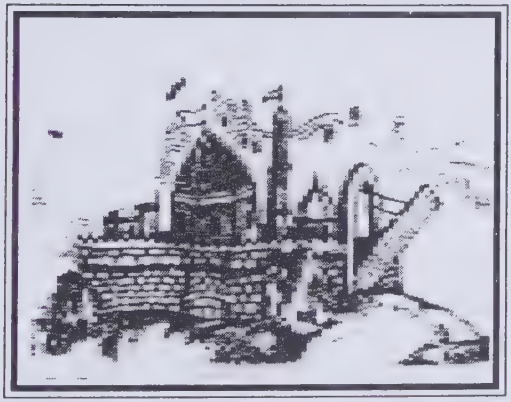
down to where he was sitting. It was none other than Mulungu Himself come down to Chimbwi.

"Chimbwi, I see you're happy tonight! I see you've the time today to look around and admire the twinkling stars. I'm pleased and, therefore, I've a little gift for you," Mulungu, the Loving One, cried out as he descended to the Valley.

Chimbwi could hardly believe his ears. Tears of joy came into his eyes as he heard Mulungu say, "Henceforth, Chimbwi, you may find comfort in the thought that by scavenging you are doing a great service to the Valley. You're getting rid of carrion and thereby preventing diseases and infection spreading from rotting meat. It is for this service that from now onwards you shall be known and respected. And since I'm pleased with you and want all my creatures to be happy, I grant you the strongest pair of jaws so that from now on you too may hunt of your own accord. And you shall be a diurnal creature – you may move by day or night whenever you please." Then Mulungu, the Ever-Busy-One, climbed up his moonbeam ladder and went away.

It was from that day that the Hyaena became both a scavenger and a hunter and was honoured as a very useful member of the Valley. So much so even humans came to hear of his fame and made films on the Hyaena and wrote books on this not very handsome hero of the great Luangwa Valley.

THE GENIE OF THE YANTRA



Margaret Bhatty

Illustrated by Suddhasattwa Basu

Whenever old Das Babu got tired of adding up the office accounts he closed the ledgers and turned his mind to doodling. He drew intricate geometrical designs using triangles, hexagons, circles and similar shapes. That particular afternoon he'd just completed another complicated drawing – his best so far – when *Whoosh* ! *Hiss* ! *Pp – oom* ! The jinn appeared.

"Command me, Master, I am your slave," it said in a rumbly voice.

Das Babu's fat belly quaked with fright and the half dozen remaining hairs on his head stood upright. "Wh-wh-wh-aat are you?"

"I am the Genie of that yantra," it replied, pointing a stubby finger at the design on the desk. "Two centuries ago I was foolish enough to disturb the meditation of a certain dervish in the Sahyadriparvat Hills. He cursed me by drawing the same yantra in the dust with his staff and binding me into it. He said I would be freed only if someone succeeded in drawing it again, and after I had fulfilled three wishes for that person."

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"Ha!" Das Babu snorted. "I might have known! All fairy tales have the same three wishes meant to make one look a complete fool. No, thank you, Jinn Sahib, you can keep your three wishes."

To his dismay the Genie began to cry, swabbing its tears with its thick pigtail. "It took two centuries for someone to duplicate the yantra," it wailed. "Perhaps no one will ever succeed a second time, and I shall remain bound into it forever and ever. You *must* wish, Master, you must! If only to set me free."

Convinced this was all a dream, Das Babu promptly wished for an apple, an orange and a pear. "Now you are free," he told the Thing.

But the jinn shook its thick head. "The wishes must be of great magnitude, Master. They must work important changes in your life, and they must bring you ultimate happiness, too."

Das Babu didn't believe in things like jinns, but he was curious. "All right, then I wish for a grand palace filled with riches and hundreds of attendants to wait on me," he said recklessly.

And that was how the huge turreted castle appeared suddenly in the children's park of the Hanging Gardens. A stout wall enclosed it with a deep moat and a drawbridge. At the immense door stood a sleek Rolls Royce with a uniformed chauffeur who embarrassed Das Babu by taking off his cap and bowing low. Inside, crammed into a hundred rooms, were priceless antiques, statues, rare fabrics, silver, gold, jewels and gemstones. A host of two hundred servants swept and dusted, and in the great kitchen, chefs drew on unending stores of food, meats and wines which they set

before Das Babu in the immense dining hall. But his stomach rebelled, for he was a strict vegetarian and a simple eater.

Sneaking back to his one room tenement in Dadar, he brought over his own little oil stove, pots and pans and vegetables. He cooked for himself in his bedroom with its marble screen and jasper fountains. He did it secretly in the middle of the night for he feared the servants' laughter. They seemed to him very upper class and entirely at home with all this splendour.

But he needed money to buy his stores, a small need which the jinn wouldn't fulfil as his second wish. So he took a necklace of diamonds and rubies weighing half a kilo to pawn at a jeweller's.

The man gaped at the piece placed so casually on his counter, and then gaped at Das Babu in his homespun kurta, dhoti and chappals. He also stared at the car parked outside the street. Then taking out a catalogue, the fellow studied it intently, turning over the necklace. Having satisfied himself about something, he phoned the police.

Four inspectors strode in and, surrounding Das Babu, snarled at him. "Where did you get this?" one asked, thrusting the necklace under his nose.

"It came with the castle. The jinn would know."

"Jinn?! You liar! D'you know this thing is worth forty lakhs?"

"Forty lakhs?" Das Babu echoed faintly. "But I don't need that much. A hundred rupees are enough to keep me in vegetables, atta and oil."

"What's more, this jewellery belongs to the collection of the late Nizam of Hyderabad," the jeweller said. "It's been missing for years."

"Achcha?" cried Das Babu indignantly. "Then you had all better come up to the castle and look at the rest of the stuff. There's heaps of it."

Out in the street the chauffeur snapped to attention, bowed and opened the car door. The four policemen looked at the Rolls suspiciously. There was no number plate. "You have registration papers, documents, import licence, receipts for this thing?" they asked.

Das Babu shook his head. "The jinn brought it with the castle."

"Jinn?" they all exclaimed. What kind of nut was this?

But the road to the castle on top of the hill was blocked by four gigantic bulldozers sent by the corporation to demolish the castle as an illegal structure on government land. However, the servants had refused to let down the drawbridge.

As soon as Das Babu and his police escort crossed the moat, the first bulldozer moved forward and got wedged in the outer gateway.

The men now went on a conducted tour of the palace, with the two hundred attendants trailing them. Das Babu chuckled at their astonishment. They were speechless. "It all came with the castle," was the only explanation the old man could give them.

Of course, an inventory would have to be made of everything in order to trace the owners of stolen items. The customs and income tax men would have to be consulted too. It would take more than a year.

"A year!" cried the demolition squad. "We're going to knock this thing down right now. Those are our orders."

In all the excited shouting and argument, Das Babu's attendants began to arm themselves with kitchen knives,

choppers, table lamps and footstools.

"Please! Please, gentlemen, do not quarrel," Das Babu cried. "I will explain everything."

He then proceeded to tell them about the Genie of the Yantra but they laughed in disbelief. "All right then, I will summon the jinn," Das Babu said and went on to draw the intricate yantra. Nothing happened!

"A great tantrik, are you?" the officials sneered. The police now charged him with theft, of priceless pieces from private collections and museums, with fraud, for not registering his antiques under the Antiquities Act, for gold in excess of the quantity allowed under the Gold Control Act, for smuggling foreign goods and a car into the country, for putting up an illegal structure encroaching on government land, for ...

"Stop! I plead guilty," Das Babu cried. "Let me go and fetch a change of clothes before you take me away."

Hurrying to his apartment he locked himself into his bathroom and, sitting on the solid gold bath tub, anxiously examined the yantra he had drawn, comparing it with the original. A tiny line was missing!

Whoosh! *Hiss* ! *Pp – oom*! went the jinn as soon as the yantra was complete.

"Command me, Mas –"

"I wish to be transported far away from here – anywhere, some desert place perhaps, where there isn't another human for miles," cried Das Babu. "Hurry – or I'll be arrested."

In a flash Das Babu found himself gazing out from his bedroom balcony across miles of endless sand. Much relieved, he walked through the echoing halls of his palace and was content.

Life was much simpler now. He washed his own clothes and hung them from the battlements, prepared his own simple meals from the endless store of vegetables in the cellar, and spent his time rummaging through his riches. "Nobody can say I wasn't honest with the police," he thought. "But the stupids wouldn't believe me."

Although he was in the middle of a vast desert, the taps in the castle ran hot and cold, and the moat was full of water. He didn't know where it all came from, but it was there.

"Why, I could transform this place," he thought dreamily. "It will be the jinn's last job. I'll ask it to make the desert bloom, lay out an airfield, provide amusement parks, swimming pools, casinos – and I'll make enough to retire comfortably."

Thus dreaming he dozed, but a buzzing sound roused him. Going to the window he saw a helicopter alight in the courtyard from which four Arabs jumped down. "So this is Arabia, is it?" Das Babu thought. "Thank goodness it's not the Great Indian Desert! And here are some oil-rich sheikhs come to call on me ..."

But they refused his hospitality and surrounded Das Babu.

"You spik Engleesh?" one asked.

"Yes."

"Your passport, please –"

"I don't have one."

"Illegal immigrant, eh?"

"This your house?"

"This is my palace."

"We arrest you in the name of the King," they told Das Babu and showed him a circular sent out by Interpol, carrying

his picture. It seemed the Indian government had asked for his extradition to face charges of smuggling, theft of priceless antiques, and other crimes. "Pack and come with us."

In his bedroom Das Babu summoned the jinn for the last time. "The endless trouble it has caused me trying to help you gain your freedom!" he cried. "I refuse to take any more. I wish to be transported back to Bombay and left as poor as I was before you cursed me with riches."

The jinn looked worried. "But will this wish make you happy?" it asked. "Otherwise the dervish's curse on me cannot be removed."

"I cannot tell you how happy it will make me," Das Babu said fervently.

And that was how he came to be camped in a sheltered niche under a railway overpass. In Mahim. Scrounging vegetable from the market close by, he boiled them for soup in an old tin, using rags, rubbish and paper for his fire. Sharing his shelter was a shifty fellow, long-haired and scruffy, a petty thief named Bhola.

On his return to the city Das Babu, disguised now in wig, whiskers and beard, had sneaked up to his room in Dadar. The door was locked and sealed, and displayed prominently was a notice offering a reward of Rs 50,000 for information leading to his arrest. He couldn't get away fast enough.

While his cabbage stalks simmered, Das Babu sat one morning and watched the traffic pass. A sleek Rolls Royce went cruising by.

"When I worked as a driver once, I drove a car like that," Bhola said.

"I owned a car like that once," Das Babu said. Both laughed, neither believing the other.

"The car belonged to a very powerful tantrik," Bhola went on. "He could call up jinns and spirits and make them do anything he wanted. They put up a mahal for him on the hill – overnight. And when the police came to arrest him, the jinns came and took him and his palace away, right under their eyes. But my job vanished with the car."

Oho! Das thought. No wonder the fellow seemed familiar. But the fact that Bhola hadn't recognized him showed how good his disguise was.

"If a jinn came along and offered you three wishes, what would you wish for?" Das Babu asked, keeping his voice casual.

"I'd ask for a mahal of course, like that one, full of food, servants, gold and jewels and half a dozen foreign cars," Bhola cried. "Arey? Why do you laugh, bhai? What's funny, mister? Why do you laugh?"

But Das Babu was so doubled up with mirth that he couldn't answer.

THE KING TREE

Poile Sengupta

Illustrated by Jagadish Roy

I did not want to move into a new neighbourhood. I did not want to move. I wanted to be where I was, with my books, my crayons, my room with its shallow step, with nights that were well-worn and comforting. But there was no help for it – there never is – and so I was transported, books and all other apparatus, to Meghpur. And if ever I had dreams of opening out into a new person, I was certain it would never happen here – in this unknown, mocking place.

Or so I thought, at first.

I suppose one can get used to anything – even loneliness. Those first days, loneliness changed from being something raw and pickled to a smoother taste, rather like toasted cheese. I missed my school where nobody stared at me, I missed Arup who was always ten minutes early so that he could chat with me on the way. About? About everything – cricket, teachers, football, books, swimming, people, feeling helpless. And now here I was, finding the ever-cawing crows a little more familiar every day, watching the sparrows behaving like self-important housewives, the

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long trail of ants in search of water – so orderly, so uncomplicated. And beyond the gate, the great neem standing like a king – sheltering his people, the poor, the needy, the tired, the dogs. The buses stopped near him, too. And those who waited used his shade. "Nature is still possible here," said father, and he was right, though very often I wished I could also see a little more of humankind!

"It will be all right when term begins," said mother. "You will have plenty of friends in your new school." But it would not be the same, and anyway term began in July. This was May.

May. Maytime. Summertime. The fragrance of jasmine. Of raat ki rani. Holiday time. Merriment. Maytime. Mangoes. Tagore. The brooding melancholy of storm clouds. And I all alone.

Then suddenly, I was jolted out of my thoughts by an enormous jet of noise outside the house. A rough masculine voice, dogs, the buzz of a crowd, and like a new tune, the high excited tones of young people. I peeped out. There, under the King Tree, stood a man with an axe, and around him the bus crowd, and three children. Two were tall, a boy and a girl, and the third was smaller, a tousled girl who looked as if she has just come out of a haystack.

I stared at them. They were arguing with the man, shouting at him, and he was shouting back, something about contractor saab, firewood, money. The boy, looking sad, angry and brave all at the same time, was trying to reason with him, so was the older girl, while the little one danced about, brandishing her arms and sticking out her tongue now and then. There was a higher wave of noise and suddenly the man raised his hand at the children and the

axe glinted. Before I knew it myself, I was out of the door and hobbling across to them, as fast as I could.

They stopped for a moment and stared at me, all of them. As I knew they would. The man lowered his hand and stared. The bigger girl took a step forward. Then stopped. The boy looked, but only at my face. The little girl's eyes were huge. And then slowly, they unfroze, the little girl danced up to me and led me forward by my shirtsleeve. "He's also come to help," she proclaimed at the top of her voice. "He's doesn't want our tree cut ... You don't, do you?" she asked me confidentially, still at the top of her voice. "You believe in equalogy, don't you? Don't you?" she persisted. "In everything being equal, trees, plants, flowers, us?" But even if I had wanted to say anything, I could not have been heard, because the man had started again, shouting. "You think this is your grandfather's property? My master wants this wood. It is good wood. If I want to cut it I can. Who are you to stop me? People need firewood and we're supplying them. You go and talk to the contractor saab. Tell him, not me."

"I don't care who your contractor saab is," yelled back the boy. "You can get firewood from somewhere else. But not this tree. Mind. Not this one."

"Not this one," the bigger girl said.

"Not this one," screamed the little one. "You yell too," she told me. "We need more voices." And then like a true child of democracy, she began chanting:

No, you can't,
No, you can't,
No, you can't cut this tree !

And funnily enough, I began chanting it too, softly at first, then louder, as the others joined in, giving it a tune and a beat. We circled round the tree, weaving a strange magic under the King, who spread his arms out, protecting us, the poor, the needy, the unwanted, the dogs. And as I hobbled round on my crutches, dragging my wasted leg with me, I felt my kinship with the King, the great one-legged King. And I looked up into the green, the dark, the secret, and I saw the vastnesses there, the caverns of promise.

There is no space for self-pity in equalogy.

THE NOSE DOCTOR

M R Kapoor

Translated and abridged from the original novel in Hindi
by the author

Illustrated by Suddhasattwa Basu

Kalpana had a beautiful nose. Anyone who looked at Kalpana was full of praise for her nose. But Kalpana did not like it. She thought that her nose was too thin or too pointed. Whenever she was amongst her friends, she looked at their noses. If she met a new person she remembered him by the nose.

One day Kalpana caught a cold. She carried a handkerchief all the time and squeezed and twisted her nose. The nose became a nuisance. She was very annoyed. Her school tests were nearing, but her cold refused to depart. She had to sit for her test with a handkerchief in one hand and a pen in the other. Very soon she found that she could either write her paper, or take care of her nose. She hit upon a plan. She fixed a paper clip on her nose and breathed through her mouth.

When she went home that day and looked in the mirror, she was horrified. Her nose had been pressed so hard that it looked like a punctured balloon. She found her nose no better the next day. On her way to school, she saw a bush

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full of berries. She ate the fruit and put a kernel in each of her nostrils so that her nose would not look deformed.

At school, her friends were surprised to see her nose so swollen. One of the girls came close and tried to look into her nostrils. Suddenly Kalpana sneezed and off went the two kernels like bullets, hitting the girl who was looking into the nostrils. Thereafter, Kalpana felt that her nostrils had widened too much. She fancied they were two tunnels through which even an elephant could pass.

That night, when her mother gave her some medicine and put her to bed, she seriously thought of doing something about the nose. When all were fast asleep, Kalpana stealthily tiptoed out of her room. She was soon walking down a road. She was all alone. Not a human being, not even a stray dog could be seen. She went farther and farther on until she met an old woman. She said to the old woman, "Can you tell me of a doctor who can cure my nose?"

"There is a doctor," the old woman replied, "But you can't very well reach him. When you have walked down to the end of this road, you will see a funny village. Walk to the end of the village and you will come to a thick forest. Beyond the forest, there is a mountain on the top of which lives the doctor. It is very hard to reach that place, for it is guarded by fierce demons."

Kalpana was so anxious to see the doctor, that she didn't care much for the hardships. "Come what may," she said, "I will see the doctor." Bidding goodbye to the old woman, she went on.

The dark road stretched ahead. On one side of it were the electric posts. Kalpana counted them. One, two, three, four,

five, six, seven, eight, nine and ten. In all, ten posts – and then the road ended. She ran fast, touched each post and counted them. One, two, three, four ... At the tenth post she stopped.

But alas, the ten posts were still ahead of her. Perhaps she had not run, but only thought she had run. Again she ran touching each post and counting them one by one. When she reached the tenth post, she saw that all the ten posts were in front of her.

As she considered this, she saw a wolf coming towards her. She was afraid for a moment and thought of running away. But the wolf came straight up to her and rolled at her feet.

"Goodness, it's Blackie!" she cried out with joy, "Why have you come here? Why?" Blackie wagged his tail and said, "Don't you know? A big fair is being held in the next village. All have gone there, and I must go too."

"Blackie is talking like a human being. What fun! How wonderful!" thought Kalpana. Then she said, "Blackie, you're talking in our language. Where did you learn it?"

"Why, I learnt it from you."

"And how did you change from a dog to a wolf?"

"That's easy. When you were gone, no one gave me food. To earn my food, I must look frightening. So I became a wolf."

Kalpana burst into laughter. Then she told him that she was going to the nose doctor who lived far away. "At the end of this road there is a village. Beyond the village there is a jungle. Beyond the jungle there is a mountain. The doctor lives on top of the mountain."

"Hurry up," Blackie said. "Sit on my back and I shall fly." Kalpana sat on his back and Blackie zoomed into the sky like an aeroplane.

"What a funny ride!" thought Kalpana.

After some time they came to a road which went round and round. Blackie dropped her there and said, "Go across this road and you will find the way to Amarpur village."

And then, magically, Blackie disappeared.

Kalpana saw that the big road in front of her was coming from nowhere and going to nowhere. It lay in a circle. There were hundreds and hundreds of cars, small and big, zooming at breakneck speed around it. Each one tried to overtake the other. "Why this mad race?" Kalpana thought.

She decided to run across as soon as she saw a slight gap. In a moment she was in the middle of the road surrounded by screeches of the cars and shouts of the racers. They were all angry with her for not crossing the road the proper way, by jumping across. Suddenly, Blackie appeared from nowhere. He was sitting on the roof of a car. He shouted at the racers.

"Stop you fools, don't you know she is Kalpana? She is going to see the doctor. Let her pass."

The racers bowed politely. Blackie escorted Kalpana to the other side of the road. "What is this mad race for?" Kalpana asked Blackie.

"You see that pearl tree?" Blackie said. "The winner will get this tree." Kalpana saw the pearl tree and laughed. The tree was just an ordinary tree with electric bulbs of different colours hanging all over it.

"Why do you laugh?" asked Blackie.

"I'm laughing because they are mad for nothing. These are not pearls," she told him.

Blackie did not believe her. Kalpana ran up to the tree and broke all the bulbs one by one. There was darkness all

around. The racers disappeared. Blackie was nowhere. Kalpana stood alone surrounded by darkness.

While she groped in the darkness, she touched a thorny tree and a voice said, "Would you give me a good slap, please?" "What a funny thing," Kalpana thought. The voice was heard again – "Please give me a nice punch."

"Someone is hungry. He wants a slap and a nice punch. Or did he say lunch?" she wondered, and looked around, but she could see nothing. "Please hurry up. Give me a nice kick," the voice said again.

Kalpana felt pity for the unseen thing. "Who are you?" she asked.

"I am the pearl tree," came the answer.

"Why do you want a slap, a punch and a kick?"

"I'm hungry. That is why."

Kalpana laughed. But the next moment she was serious. She slapped the tree, then gave it a nice punch and finally kicked it hard. The tree was uprooted.

"Well done, girl," said the tree, "Now you can go to Amarpur."

"Where is the road to Amarpur?" she asked.

"There is a pit where I was. Put your head into the pit and you will reach Amarpur." So saying the voice was gone and Kalpana heard no more.

Kalpana did as she was told. She put her head into the pit and slipped down and down. She felt as if she were falling from a cliff. Then with a thud, she landed on earth. "My neck must have broken into pieces," she thought, and to make sure, she felt her neck with both hands. But her neck

was intact. Then she touched her head. It was fine. She touched her legs, feet, ears and nose. Everything was perfect. She was not even bruised. As she wondered about this, she heard cries from nearby, but could see nothing but some large cardboard boxes. These were scattered around like dustbins with blue paper pasted round them.

These, Kalpana soon discovered, were the houses of the people living in that village. She had fallen on one of them and crushed it. People were buried in it and they were crying for help.

As soon as she realized this, she jumped off the crushed box. Meanwhile her eyes fell on the houses nearby. What she saw there was very strange. From the round hole made in the roof, one person dashed out with an acrobatic jump. His legs appeared first and his head appeared last. As he fell on the ground, he bumped three times before he could stand firmly on his feet. The man was hardly one and a half feet tall. He was as stout as a wrestler and had a loincloth round his waist.

"Who are you?" the man asked.

"My name is Kalpana."

"Are you?" he said with surprise. "But she was a nice girl." Kalpana was puzzled. How did this fellow know her name? She said, "I have not changed. I am always nice to others."

"Then why did you crush this house?"

"I didn't know. I fell from above."

The wrestler's face suddenly brightened. "Did you fall from above?"

"Of course. Nobody can fall from below."

"I mean, did you put your head into the pit?"

"Yes I did. And that is why I did not know where I was falling." The wrestler began to dance and sing loudly.

Pinki, Minki, Tonu, Tinki
Bholu, Golmatolu, Chinki
King's officers,
Fearless soldiers,
Swinging neck
Round stomach
Mr Budha, Mr Chadha
It has come, it has come
Day of freedom, day of freedom!

When the people of Amarpur heard the wrestler sing, they poured out of their houses. Like the wrestler, they jumped upside down out of their houses through the holes and stood firmly on their feet after three or four bumps.

"Gentlemen," said the wrestler, "Here is our Kalpana. You know her very well."

"No, no. It is not true." Kalpana said. "You do not know me at all!" But all the people said in one voice: "We know you, we know you."

"But I do not know any of you."

"You are lying."

"I never lie, never."

The wrestler came forward and said, "It's all right, Kalpana. You may not remember us just now, but we know you and you know us." Then he turned to the people and said, "Gentlemen, as I was telling you, Kalpana has come from above. That means the race is over. Kalpana is the winner of the pearl tree." The people started dancing, singing, kicking and hitting one another.

"No. You're wrong," Kalpana shouted. "There were not pearls on the tree, but only electric bulbs. I have smashed them all." A hush fell on the crowd. An old man with white beard came forward and said, "They have been cheating us. Claiming that they have the pearl tree, they have been cutting off our thumbs and giving us the useless blue papers."

The village people wept and said, "We shall not give our thumbs, we shall not take the blue papers."

Kalpana could understand nothing. A fat man, Motulala, pushed himself forward and said, "My dear brothers and sisters, it is no use crying. The King's procession is about to arrive. We must make a complaint."

As he said this, policemen riding on horses were seen coming from all sides. The villagers began to jump and dance. Kalpana asked them to run away and hide themselves, but they hardly listened to her. The policemen caned them, the horses kicked them and trampled on them, but they continued shouting and dancing with joy. The more they were hurt, the more happy they looked. Then the policemen left.

Kalpana was hiding behind the tree. She saw that many of the people had fallen, unable to get up. Many had been hurt badly. Their limbs were crushed under the hooves of the horses. But they were all laughing. The wrestler was lying in the pit. When Kalpana pulled him by the leg, he said, "Please blow some air into my stomach."

"What happened to you?"

"Nothing much, only my belly is punctured. Blow some air into it and I shall be all right." Kalpana blew some air through his mouth into his belly and in a moment he was laughing and dancing. "Why do you laugh so much?" asked Kalpana, puzzled.

"They think they can crush and kill us," he said, "But they don't know what we are made of. We are immortals. They trample us under the hooves of their horses again and again, but we never die. This has been going on and on."

Meanwhile other injured villagers began requesting Kalpana to blow air into them. Kalpana obliged them and they were all as before.

"Let us go and see the procession," they said. But Kalpana was worried about the other people who lay buried in the house on which she had fallen. The wrestler said, "Leave them there. The King shall be pleased to build a new house for them and the Queen shall be pleased to give them money."

"But they will die," Kalpana protested.

"Didn't I tell you they never die?" He pulled her away and soon she found herself amidst a big crowd.

Kalpana was surprised to see such a big crowd. There were swarms of men, women and children. Some were crying, some were laughing. There was hardly any place to sit or stand. Policemen were beating the people with canes and they were surging forward like waves of the sea. Suddenly the crowd yelled, "The King is coming, the Queen is coming."

First to appear were three officers riding on horses. Kalpana burst into laughter when she saw the long noses of these officers. Each one had a nose as big as an elephant's trunk. They were holding the reins with their noses. Then came the train of ministers. The length of their noses was as big as their status.

The King and the Queen were sitting on a chariot driven by four horses. The noses of the King and the Queen were the longest and these were held by the ministers. Kalpana

could control her laughter no more. The wrestler said, "Don't laugh, Kalpana. They will be angry and the police will arrest you." Kalpana stared at him.

"What can I do?" she said. "It's so funny!"

The King and Queen had taken their seats on the stage. Kalpana was still laughing. Suddenly the King noticed her laughing. He said something to his officer and a voice came from the loudspeaker, "Constable, give that girl two cuts with the cane."

The wrestler whispered to Kalpana, "I told you not to laugh. Now be quick. Carry me on your shoulder. I will take the cuts for you."

"Why should you suffer for me?"

"Actually I am not doing it for you. I am doing it for the King and the Queen. The more we suffer, the more their noses grow."

Without waiting for Kalpana's answer the wrestler jumped up and perched himself on her left shoulder. Motulala who was also standing by, sat on her right shoulder. The constable hit her with his cane first on the right and then on the left side. The canes fell on the wrestler and Motulala. They jumped like rubber balls and fell into the crowd of officers. There was a peal of laughter from the people around. In another minute, the wrestler and Motulala were in their places. The Minister of the King was making an announcement. "Silence! The court is in session. Now people will come forward one by one and offer their thumbs to the King."

The people ran helter-skelter. The police lathi-charged them. The King and the Queen got very angry. They started beating the people, using their noses as whips. The Queen's nose got entangled in Kalpana's hair and she began to cry.

"Oh, my nose! She has caught my nose."

The police officer came forward and ordered Kalpana to release the Queen's nose. Kalpana chuckled and let it go.

The Queen was pleased with Kalpana. She turned to the King, "Who is this girl? I want to give her a reward."

The King passed on the query to the minister, who passed it on to his officer, who further passed it on until it reached the constable. The constable was quick to answer. He said, "This girl is very naughty. She has told the people that they should neither give their thumbs, nor take the blue papers in lieu of thumbs."

At this the King became annoyed. He called the girl and ordered the minister on his right side, "Raise my right hand and give me a knife. I want to cut off her thumb."

But the minister on the left side said, "Your Majesty, you must first reward her for releasing the Queen's nose." Kalpana noted that the King was unable to use his hands. There were two special ministers who used his hands for him.

The two ministers began to quarrel and pull the hands in opposite directions. The King writhed with pain.

"My dear Queen," he cried, "Please save my hands."

But the Queen was worried about the fly which was sitting on her nose. She said, "My dear King, what can I do? A fly is sitting on my nose."

Soon the fire engines arrived to rescue the Queen's nose from the wicked fly. The King cried, "Oh, Queen, you are so cruel. You don't care for my hands."

"Why don't you cut off your hands?" said the Queen, "Your hands are useless. See I have my hands, but I cannot protect my nose from the fly."

Kalpana burst into hilarious, delirious laughter. This

made everyone laugh. The King forgot his pain and laughed. All the ministers, officers and the people started laughing, shouting, dancing till all of them fell unconscious.

When Kalpana regained her senses, there was no King, no Queen, no ministers and no officers. The wrestler, Motulala, Pinki, Minki, Tonu, Tinki – all had disappeared. There was no stage and no crowd. Kalpana was all alone. She looked around and found that she was in the thick of a jungle.

The jungle was thick and fearful. There was no path to go to or come from. Kalpana could not decide which way to go. Then an idea came to her. She picked up a small stone, placed it on her head and muttered: "Tell, my stonie, left or right?"

She let the stone go and it slipped from her head, near her right foot. She started walking to the right and soon came to a pool with cool and clear water. Around the pool she saw the footmarks of a number of animals on the wet soil.

"Oh, I shall soon be face to face with lions, tigers, leopards and whatnot," she thought, quite calmly.

She went on, following the footmarks and carefully looking about for the beasts. Suddenly she stopped. A rope-like thing hung from a tree ahead. Kalpana looked closely and found it was the tail of a wild beast. It could be a leopard or a tiger, she thought. Slowly and silently she advanced towards the beast. The beast was looking the other way. She stopped near him and said, "I spy Lamdumma!"

The leopard with the long tail was shaken and surprised. He tumbled off the tree, and looked down-in-the-mouth and defeated.

"Oh dear, my tail was hanging," he said to Kalpana.

"Otherwise you couldn't have seen me and I would have caught you after saying dhappa."

Kalpana smiled and said, "You think you are very clever?"

The leopard tried hard to remember something: "What did you say my name was?"

"I said Lamdumma. You have this long tail, don't you?"

"I've never heard this word. It is not my name."

"Then tell me your name."

"That's the trouble with me. I don't know."

"What do you mean? Have you no brain?"

"No, I have none."

"Who ate it?"

"I don't know. If I had a little bit of it, I would have become a big minister."

"And what are you at present?"

"I am only a small minister."

"Who is the big minister?"

"The elephant."

"Has he a big brain?"

"No, he has no brain but he has a big belly."

Kalpana laughed. The leopard thought for a moment and then asked, "Do you have a brain?"

"Of course I have. I can count up to a hundred. I can add, subtract, multiply. I can sing a song and tell a story."

"You know so much? Please give me a little bit of your brain so that I may become a big minister."

"How can I cut out my brain? No one can."

"You *must*, or else I will eat you." Kalpana was a little frightened. But she got an idea. She took a pinch of dust,

made three circles over the leopard's head and said,

Jantra's herb, Tantra's thread.
Brain come in Lamdumma's head.

The leopard was very pleased. He was about to rush to the King when he stopped. "How will the King know I have a brain?" he said to Kalpana. "Give me a certificate." Kalpana took a leaf and wrote on it with a thorn: I have given some brain to Lamdumma. Please make him a big minister.

Holding the letter in his paw, the leopard ran to meet the King.

Kalpana walked on. She came to a tree full of mangoes, and suddenly realized how hungry she was. She climbed the tree quickly but as she reached out to pluck a mango, it fell to the ground. This happened again and again. As she looked angrily down she spied two eyes burning like coals. It was a black panther sitting on the ground. She slowly and silently climbed down to the lowermost branch of the tree and suddenly jumped in front of the black panther saying, "I spy Bhusmunda."

The black panther looked sad and defeated. He said, "Oh dear, my eyes were burning. Otherwise I would have caught you after saying dhappa."

Kalpana smiled tauntingly and said, "Do you think I am a fool?" The black panther tried to remember something and said, "What did you say my name was?"

"I said you are Bhusmunda."

"What is Bhusmunda? That isn't my name."

"Then what *is* your name?"

"I don't know, but I am not Bhusmunda."

"How can you say that when you don't know?"

"What does Bhusmunda mean?"

"It means hay-head – one whose head is stuffed with hay." The black panther looked dejected. "You are right. My head *is* filled with hay. Had I had a little bit of brain I would have become a junior minister."

"Oh, you are not even a junior minister? I thought you were the King."

"No. I am only a senior officer. I manage everything. I virtually rule the jungle. Can't you give me a little bit of your brain so that I can be a junior minister?"

Kalpana thought it was no use arguing with him. She took a pinch of dust,made three circles over his head and muttered:

Jantra's herb, Tantra's thread.
Brain come in Bhusmunda's head.

She also gave him a certificate. The black panther took the certificate and ran to the King.

The news spread in the jungle like wildfire that Kalpana was giving a brain to everyone. The animals came rushing to Kalpana and surrounded her. She held her breath and stood alert. She started calling "I spy" to each one of the animals.

"I spy Lamnakku." The black bear with the long nose was defeated.

"I spy Dhusarpetu." The donkey with the brown belly hung his head.

Soon there were hundreds of animals around Kalpana all dejected and defeated. They all started asking for a brain.

"Give us a brain, we want to be collectors."

"Give us a brain, we want to be directors."

"Give us a brain, we want to be inspectors."

Kalpana asked them to come one by one, but they began shouting in chorus. She scolded them, shouted at them, pushed them but they continued advancing towards her. Some pulled her hair, others tore at her clothes, still another licked her head. Kalpana was scared. She crouched down quickly and sneaked out between the legs of the animals.

She ran and ran till she reached the King's court. The desperate animals streamed behind her.

King, the lion, was sitting on the throne. Nearby was seated his Prime Minister, the elephant. "Save me, Your Majesty! Save me!" cried Kalpana.

"What is the matter?" asked the King.

Kalpana looked over her shoulder. The bears, wolves, dogs, horses, donkeys, camels and others were following her shouting: "We want brain! We want brain!"

The King looked towards his Prime Minister. The elephant raised his trumpet and ordered them to be silent. "Now, tell us why you are running," the King said to Kalpana. "They all want a brain from me," explained Kalpana. "I have only one brain. If I distribute it to them what will happen to me? I will become a blockhead."

"What can we do in this matter?" said the Prime Minister, "You have given brains to two persons, so now you will have to give to all!"

"No, no, no," Kalpana protested, "I can give to two more, three more, four more, but not to all."

The Prime Minister consulted the King and then said, "All right, select two of them." Kalpana sighed with relief. She took a piece of charcoal, and drew four circles.

"See these four circles," she explained to the animals. "You must jump once in the first circle, twice in the second, thrice in the third and four times in the fourth. You must also count your jumps. Anyone who makes a mistake will be out. The one who does it correctly will be selected." Kalpana showed them how. The black bear came forward first and started jumping and counting – *One, two, four seven, eight, ten* ...

Kalpana said, "Out." Next came the camel. His shape and size made everyone laugh – *One, four* ...

Kalpana said, "Out." The brown wolf started with confidence – *One, two, three, ten* ...

Kalpana said, "Out." Now the other animals standing in the queue became wary of the magic circles. Some of them left the queue and admitted defeat. Some others still tried but failed.

Lastly, the King said to the fox, "Everyone says you are intelligent. I am sure you can jump across the circles."

The fox thought for a moment and said, "Your Majesty, since we have no brain, we can't count up to ten. So it's no use trying."

Just then, Lamdumma, the leopard, and Bhusmunda, the black panther, arrived. The King said to Lamdumma, "You say you have a brain?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, this is the certificate."

"And you too have a brain?" The King asked Bhusmunda. "Yes, Your Majesty, here is my certificate."

"Then jump across the circles."

Kalpana explained the rules. They tried one by one but failed. All the animals laughed, and the King became sad.

The elephant raised his trumpet and said to Kalpana,

"You naughty girl, why have you given false certificates to our officers?"

"There was no alternative, sir," replied Kalpana, "I told them no one can cut out his brain and give it to someone else but they threatened to eat me."

"But you have committed a crime and you will be punished," the Prime Minister observed. Kalpana was scared. Suddenly the King, who had become very sad and weak, fell off the throne. The elephant lifted him and placed him back on the throne. Everyone was worried.

The Prime Minister then turned to Kalpana again, "Do you really have a brain?"

"Yes sir, I study in Class Two. I can count up to a hundred. I can add, subtract and multiply. I can sing a song and tell a story."

"I am not interested in all this," declared the Prime Minister. "If you really have a brain, tell us why our King is sick."

All the animals knew the King was sick. He was looking very weak, very sad. The Prime Minister addressed the court: "Our King is very sick. The one who explains why our King is sick will become a senior minister."

Everyone started thinking. Some closed their eyes and began counting on their paws. Some stared into the sky and began tapping their heads. "Please be quick," called the Prime Minister.

"Let me know the cause of the King's sickness."

Lamdumma was the first to come forward. He said, "I think the King is sick because we don't have a brain." The Prime Minister looked at the King, but the King

shook his head indicating "No."

The Prime Minister ordered Kalpana to explain the King's sickness. Kalpana gathered her courage and said, "The King has become old. He knows he will die. He's worried who will be the next King."

All the animals seemed to think that must be right, but the Prime Minister looked at the King and he shook his head indicating "No."

At this, the animals became restless. How could someone with a brain be wrong? They began to advance on Kalpana threateningly, growling, hissing and stretching out their claws.

Kalpana was scared. She quickly crouched down and sneaked out between the legs of the animals. She ran and ran without looking back. The animals raced after her. She was out of the jungle now, but the animals were still following her ...

Kalpana ran and ran till she saw a beautiful garden before her, full of flowers, ponds of cool water and spacious lawns. There was a big gate with huge concrete structures on either side. As Kalpana came up to the gate, desperate to get away from the animals chasing her, she heard a voice from high above, "Eyes shut and walk to the left." Kalpana looked around but could see no one. Another voice came from the other side of the gate. "Shut your eyes and walk to the right."

"Who's calling me?" Kalpana said to herself. "I can't see anyone!" The two voices were heard again –

"Eyes shut and walk to the left."

"Shut your eyes and walk to the right."

Kalpana liked the voice from the right. She shut her eyes and walked to that side, only to collide with the concrete

column. She raised her eyes and saw to her surprise a beautiful swan looking down upon her. "I can see from up here," the swan said, "That some animals are chasing you."

"Yes, yes," said Kalpana.

"Get into my stomach," the swan said, "There is a bolt on your right. Pull the bolt and you will find the door. Be quick."

Kalpana found the bolt. She pulled it and the door opened. She hurried inside and the door closed automatically. A moment later she heard the animals panting outside, asking the swan about her. "Get away from here," said the swan. "No girl came here."

When the animals went away, Kalpana tried to open the door but it was jammed. She cried loudly to the swan. "My dear swan, I can't open the door. Please help me."

But the swan only laughed and said, "I cannot help you my dear girl because my head is in the sky, above the clouds. I cannot reach you."

Kalpana now heard the other swan's voice. "I told you to walk to the left. You did not listen, foolish girl. Now you'll have to remain in his stomach forever."

Kalpana pleaded again and again but there was no answer. Instead she heard the swans arguing. "Give that girl to me. I saw her first," said the one on the left. "Who cares about seeing? I touched her first. She's my catch," said the other. Kalpana realized that the swans were demons. She was doomed for ever!

It was pitch dark inside the column and Kalpana found herself suffocating. She groped about in the darkness and came across a button. She pressed the button and the demon's stomach lit up.

Kalpana was wonderstruck. The stomach was a city with zigzag roads and lanes. She walked down a lane and came to a wide lawn. There were several children lying on the grass. Their eyes were closed, but they were breathing. "Oh, no!" Kalpana said to herself, "This demon has eaten so many children. And I'll soon be like them."

Kalpana ran down another lane. After some time she came back to the same place. She tried another lane, but it ended at the same spot, too.

She was feeling very thirsty, and trudged down a stony road in search of a water tap. A little way along, she heard a sound coming from a hole in the rock. Someone was breaking stones with a hammer. She scrambled up into the cave. It was pitch dark. Suddenly someone shouted, "Stop or I'll kill you."

Kalpana stopped.

"Who are you?" came the young voice.

"I am Kalpana. I am thirsty. Please help me."

For a moment there was silence. Then a boy appeared. He was holding a pointed stone hammer in his hand. "So you are the new catch?" he said.

"Please help me. I'll die of hunger and thirst."

"Don't talk of hunger and thirst. If you eat or drink anything here you will sleep like those children."

"What has happened to them?"

"They have eaten pills given by the demon. Everyone who eats them loses their appetite. They don't feel hungry nor thirsty. Gradually their minds come under the demon's control and they start obeying his orders."

"Then I certainly won't eat or drink anything."

"Good. If you keep your courage, we can both save

the children from the demon's trap."

"Who are you?" Kalpana asked, impressed.

"My name is Kaiku. I came with my friends to play in the garden. The demon caught us. Every evening he comes and wakes the children with his magic stick, trains their minds and finally gives each one of them a pill. This puts them to sleep. I only pretend to eat the pill, so I don't fall asleep. When he is gone, I come here and continue my work."

"What are you doing?" asked Kalpana eagerly.

"These swan-demons are made of cement and concrete. I am breaking this wall. I am sure I will break through one day and rescue my friends from this demon. Then we'll rescue children from the other demon. See, I have made two stone nails. When the children are rescued I shall hammer these into each demon's stomach so that no child will enter into their trap in future."

Kalpana was really glad. Although he was no taller than she was, he had courage and determination. "But Kaiku," said Kalpana, anxiously, "This wall will take a long time to break. What if the demon wins their minds by then?"

"That worries me, too," said Kaiku, "But if you help me, we can work something out."

"I'll do whatever I can." Kaiku grinned and they walked towards the lawn together.

When they came to the lawn, Kaiku disclosed his plan. "The demon will come here in a moment. He will first count the children. I'll go and sleep there. You hide yourself behind a stone. When he strikes the children with his magic stick, you come from behind and hold him by the ear."

Kalpana was not sure about the plan, but Kaiku

whispered something in her ear and her face brightened and they both started laughing. Kaiku lay down among the children. Kalpana hid behind the stone.

The sound of the door opening and closing was heard. The demon came walking at a leisurely pace towards the lawn. He looked fierce, with yellow teeth and red eyes, and two sharp horns on his head. He touched a boy with his magic stick. The boy got up. "Two and two?" asked the demon.

"Four," replied the boy.

"Not four, SIX. You are an idiot!"

He then awakened another boy and asked the same question. "Two and two?"

"Four."

"Not four, SIX. You are a blockhead!" One by one he woke up all the children and they all said that two and two make four.

"You fools! I have been teaching you for days that two and two make six. You still can't learn! How will you go out? To hell with you!" He began to hand out pills to the children. Just then, Kalpana slipped out from behind the stone and caught the demon by the ear. "*Caught the monkey by the ear, none should say Ho*!" she shouted.

There was a peal of laughter from the children, but no one said Ho. The demon was furious. "Leave me, you fool, leave my ear! I will break your teeth and smash your head." And then he cried to the other children. "Say Ho, say Ho, you fools! Quickly, say Ho!"

But no one said Ho, and Kalpana pulled his ear with more force. "I will thrash you. I will cut you to pieces. I will eat you." He threatened Kalpana in many ways but she

stood her ground, and signalled to Kaiku to take all the children out. She ordered the demon to follow. She took out the door key from his pocket and asked Kaiku to unlock the door. When all the children were out, Kalpana came out too, keeping the demon inside but still holding his ear. Then she swiftly let go and slammed the door, and Kaiku put the stone nail into it.

It was the work of a few minutes to trap the second demon in the same way. The rescued children were overjoyed, but Kalpana took her leave of them. "I must hurry to meet the nose doctor," she explained. She did not look back but ran out of the garden towards the mountain, which rose ahead of her.

There was a beautiful small house on the top of the hill. Kalpana saw that many people were standing there, perhaps to receive her. She was very disheartened to see the steep slope of the hill, but the people above threw a rope and she caught hold of it. They pulled up the rope and Kalpana was dragged from the bottom to the top.

It was the most beautiful place on earth. Hundreds of people had gathered there. Some were sitting with their legs folded neatly, meditating. Some were standing on one leg and saying prayers. Most of them had caught their noses between the thumb and one finger and were doing breathing exercises.

She approached a man standing on one leg and said, "I want to see the nose doctor. Will you kindly tell me where to find him?"

"Wait for some time," he said. "When the bell rings, we shall all go inside and meet him." The bell rang, and

everyone rushed towards the main hall. They were all holding their noses. Kalpana joined the crowd. She was stopped at the door and ordered to hold her nose. She did so and went inside.

When all were seated, a man with long hair and a beard came to the platform. Guruji smiled and said, "Press your nose, hold your breath, close your eyes and meditate saying, I am Okay, I am Okay."

Everyone pressed his nose, closed his eyes and sang, "I am Okay, I am Okay." When Kalpana saw this, she could not help laughing. Guruji opened his eyes and said, "Send this girl home."

One man came to Kalpana. He held her by the arm and asked her to leave. "Why?" Kalpana protested. "I have traveled such a long distance. I want to get my nose cured."

Guruji smiled at her and said, "Your nose is already cured. You can go home. The one who laughs gets cured of all diseases. I am glad you have learned to laugh so soon."

Kalpana did not believe this, but when she came out of the hall she found that her stuffy nose was clear. She felt as if a stream of cool air was flowing through each of the nostrils. She danced with joy and then ran towards home.

She felt she could conquer the whole world! She ran down the hill in a single breath. She ran through the garden where she had rescued the children, and into the jungle where the animals had chased her. She bravely walked into the forest where hundreds and hundreds of animals were waiting for her. She went straight up to the bear and said, "You want to eat me, don't you?"

"Yes, I will eat you," the bear replied.

Kalpana breathed in as hard as she could and the bear flew into her nose. The leopard standing nearby was terrified. He was about to run when he too flew into her nose. Seeing this, the other animals fled. But Kalpana kept on inhaling and the animals continued flowing into her nose. Within no time, two elephants, three horses, seven wolves and fifty hares found themselves in Kalpana's nose. All the other animals ran away and escaped.

Lastly Kalpana saw a wolf approaching her. She was about to breath him in, when he cried, "What are you doing? I am Blackie, your very own dog."

Kalpana was very glad to see him. "Hurry up Kalpana, we must get away," Blackie said. "King Lion is dead and the animals have elected a new king. There's no place for us here."

"Let's go," said Kalpana.

"Sit on my back," said Blackie, "I will fly." Kalpana sat on his back but Blackie could not move. "You are too heavy, Kalpana. What is the matter?"

Kalpana realized what was wrong and she sneezed and sneezed till all the animals in her nose were blown out. Blackie looked at her with surprise and awe. "Come, let's go home," said Kalpana.

Blackie zoomed into the air and in a moment left Kalpana outside her house. Kalpana saw that everyone in the house was asleep. She crept quietly to her room and stretched herself on the bed. Next day, when she got up, her nose was absolutely clear of cold. Her mother was surprised, but Kalpana just grinned. "One can't stay ill if you laugh a lot," she said. "That's what the nose doctor said!"

Biographical Notes

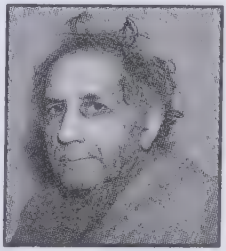
C Byrde, seabird, Rosalind Wilson's pseudonym, symbolized all that she was – a free spirit, independent, soaring way above mundane matters. She loved poetry and wrote some hilarious as well as serious poems. As Editor of *Target*, she honed the writing skills of many an aspiring author. Essentially an outdoors person, she built this story around a personal experience.

Dilip M Salwi, a popular writer, has written science books as well as science fiction for children. His *Fire on the Moon and Other Stories* entered the *Limca Book of Records* for the largest print run for a children's book – three lakh copies. *The Robots are Coming!*, another book, won the NCERT National Prize for Children's Literature.

Indira Ananthakrishnan, winner of national and state awards, has been writing short stories and plays for children for nearly two decades. An accomplished storyteller, she also translates from Tamil to English.

Jacquelin Singh has been writing and publishing books for children and adults for over thirty years. *Dee Kay and the Laughing Nataraj* was her first full-length novel for children. Other *Dee Kay* stories followed in *Target*, later brought out as a collection entitled *The Shady Sheikh and Other Stories*. Her fiction for adults include *Seasons* and *Uncle's Concubine*. Married to an Indian, she has lived for many years in a Punjab village.

Margaret Bhatty was born in Kumaon and educated in Nainital. She graduated from Lucknow, where she taught creative writing courses in the College for Literature for Neo-literates. She writes stories and novels for young readers as well as for adults. In 1982 she won the BBC World Service's International Short Story Competition. In 1995 she won the BBC Award in a Radio Play Contest for the best entry from south-east Asia.



M R Kapoor, a well-known children's writer, has nearly sixty books in Hindi to his credit. His latest publication is a collection of his favourite stories called *Bal Katha Nidhi*. Writing on every possible theme from fantasy, folktale, nature to even satire, for many readers he is one writer who has no language barriers.

Poile Sengupta has been writing for children for the last thirty years, her first book being *The Exquisite Balance*. Her *Letter to You,* under the pseudonym Perky, has been running without a break in every issue of *Children's World* since 1969. She has been a teacher who speaks five different Indian languages, in addition to English. A columnist and a well-known playwright, she has also written both fiction and non fiction for adults. *Mangalam* was her first full-length play. Since then she has written four plays for adults and two one-act plays for children.

Rashme Sehgal is a senior journalist with the *Sunday Review* of the *Times of India* from Delhi. She writes on a large number of social and developmental issues as well as art and culture. In addition to writing original stories for children, she has also translated some of Premchand's stories into English.

Reeta Dutta Gupta fell in love with the sheer beauty of the African wilderness while reading a book on it. Years later, destiny took her to the place she most wanted to visit. The stories that followed a memorable stay are set in the beautiful Luangwa Valley of Zambia. Besides writing short stories for children, her first book, a collection of ghost stories – *Midnight Train and Other Ghost Stories* – has just been published.

Saibal Chakravarty started his literary career by translating stories by Arthur Conan Doyle and Jules Vernes into Bangla and then switching over to original writing in Bangla and English. He has published a novel, some short stories and a collection of rhymes. He has won awards from the Children's Book Trust as also from the *Telegraph* of Calcutta for his short stories.

Satyajit Ray, a recipient of the Bharat Ratna, followed in the literary footsteps of his renowned father and grandfather. He established the Calcutta Film Society in 1947 while working as a designer and illustrator. His Apu trilogy – *Pather Panchali, Aparajito* and *Apur Sansar* won instant international

acclaim. He began writing in the late 1950s and created memorable characters like Feluda and Professor Shanku – one a detective and the other a scientist. In 1961, he revived *Sandesh*, the magazine started by his father Sukumar Ray, probably the first and certainly one of the best-loved writers of nonsense verse and children's books, and contributed extensively to it with stories, poems and illustrations. He died in April 1992.

Subhadra Sen Gupta, a popular writer of children's fiction, has written on the humorous, the serious, and the historical, where she delves into the romance and mystery of forgotten times and makes them come alive. She began her writing career with *Target* magazine. One of her books, *The Mystery of the House of Pigeons*, was made into a television serial for Doordarshan. She has also been doing comic strips with illustrator Tapas Guha which ran in both *Target* and *Indian Express*. She has won several awards for her contribution to children's literature.

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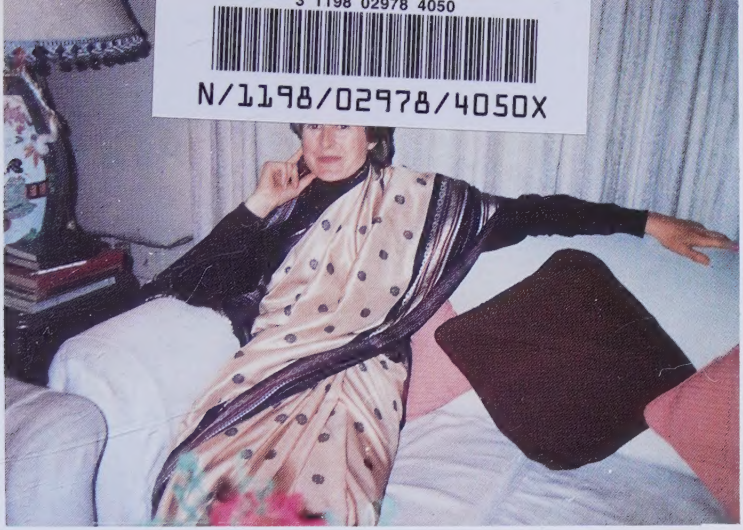

Teacher, journalist, editor ... Rosalind Wilson was all these, and more. A student at Oxford University in the 1970s, her strong bond with her Indian friends propelled her to visit India. And once here, she stayed on, fascinated. She began by teaching at St Thomas School and Springdales, both in Delhi, later switching careers to try her hand at journalism by editing the Press Institute of India's magazine *Vidura*.

Her heart, however, was always with children and when *Target* was launched, she joined as one of the editors. Later, she became its full-time editor, nurturing it with such care and commitment that it became the best-known and best-loved magazine for children.

As editor of *Target*, she took many a fledgling first-time writer under her wing, honing their skills with patience and a very fine, discerning editorial scalpel. Today, everyone who has worked with her, generously acknowledges her immense contribution to making them the writers they are today.

Essentially an outdoors person, she was a hockey player, loved exploring the countryside, trekking in the hills, bird-watching and going for hikes and long cycle rides. Extremely concerned about our environment, she influenced a whole generation of children with her ideas.

Rosalind lost a bravely-fought battle against cancer on July 28, 1992.

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